

Stories

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Friday morning at 11:30, I'm in the middle of talking about a Louise Erdrich story with the odd title "I'm a Mad Dog Biting Myself for Sympathy." It features a nameless narrator who steals first a stuffed bird as a hopeful gift for his ex-girlfriend, then a car that happens to have a baby in the back seat. Complications ensue, most of them inevitable in hindsight. What in the world was he thinking? Who is he, anyway? As he tells us, "Who I am is just the habit of what I always was, and who I'll be is the result."

In an American classroom, the students tend to fasten on the protagonist's existential dilemma, the sense of drifting, an individual lost and unsure what to do next. But that's not whom I'm addressing today. In fact, as I stare at the eighty young women seated behind rows and rows of gray modular tables, I'm not sure who's listening. Group dynamics with such a large contingent are difficult. But as a teacher with over two decades of experience, I know how to prod students, how to provoke a response.

"Tell me how you'd describe this guy." I move to within a foot of the first row of students. "Pretend you knew him and were talking about him to a friend."

No response. I'll have to call on someone who hasn't volunteered. But keep it simple.

"Give me a label for this person—you know, like funny, sad, clever." I point to a woman taking desultory notes with a Pokémon pen. "What do you think?"

She tilts her head. "Um, maybe rebel?"

I smile encouragingly. "Good point. Why?"

"Because he do—he does things different."

"Fine. What else?"

Another woman, halfway toward the back of the endless classroom, raises a hand. I recognize her, though she usually has her head down. She's not the best speaker, but she always reads the material assigned, and she has opinions. "I think he is selfish. He doesn't care about other people, only himself."

This is *not* a view you'd hear that much in the States, where individuality is prized sometimes to the point of absurdity. But this opinion comes from a student at Japan Women's University in Tokyo. And she's right. You don't have to be a fan of groupthink to realize that this guy's random actions are bound to cause distress to both himself and anyone he collides with. Maybe it takes a degree of social conformity, a regard for the whole rather than its splinters, to recognize this fact.

Emboldened by this response, a few others chime in: yes, this man acts like a spoiled child, the Japanese term for which is *wagamama*. In other stories we'll read this semester, the students will pillory the grandmother in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and the teenaged narrator in John Updike's "A & P" for the same fault: putting one's own concerns above all others and suffering the consequences. Literature may be universal, but its interpretations vary all over the globe. Why am I the exponent for this lesson?

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In March 2008, I traveled to Tokyo as a Fulbright fellow. One of my jobs was to teach a class in American literature at JWU. Wary of overburdening students whose first language wasn't English, I put together a course titled *The Modern American Short Story*. It was a basic survey, though one might reasonably wonder what's modern, what counts as American these days, and what constitutes a story. These are issues that used to bedevil both literary theory and literature departments, though the canon wars blew up the list of "masterworks," and High Theory has dwindled to a few codified stances. My directive, as I saw it, was to expose the students to a diverse and well-known body of work, all roughly within the past century, that could be described as quintessentially American. I eventually found what I was looking for in *The Seagull Reader*, a Norton story anthology edited by Joseph Kelly, and culled eight stories from the herd:

- * Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," for its feminist perspective and angle on marriage
- * Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," for its iconic status, as well as its indelible portrait of a quintessentially American, oblivious guy
- * Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," for its exploration of old-fashioned mores, Southern Gothic angle, and easy readability not usually seen in Faulkner
- * Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," for its updating of Southern Gothic and hard-line religion
- * John Updike's "A & P," for a portrait of youth and class in mid-20th-century America
- * Louise Erdrich's "I'm a Mad Dog Biting Myself for Sympathy," for existential angst and general distemper
- * Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," for an up-to-date slant on tradition and African American culture
- * Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," for its take on oral tradition and Native American culture

In all these stories, the authors seemed to be contending with myths and how they both enable and damage people's lives. I figured—and I was right—that the students would be most interested in the American dream and the push to success; the idea that anyone can make it with hard work, talent, and a little luck; self-made individuals, malleable identity, and social mobility. All these aspects of America have some truth and are why people continue to emigrate there, though anyone living in the United States can attest to forces that stymie social progress, often having to do with the same capitalist myths. In fact, I could have called the course "Myths of America."

Given these themes, it could have been a course in history or sociology, but literature has a way of dramatizing the conflicts that other fields usually lack. And even seen through the warping prism of fiction, the patterns have a devastating accuracy. As Picasso said, "Art is the lie that tells a truth."

As for the pragmatics of the course: though I'd envisioned the class as a seminar, I was teaching to four score young women in various states of interest. I'm temperamentally more of a respondent than a lecturer. Back at the University of Mississippi, my home institution at the time, I had led a world literature survey with one hundred twenty students that broke into discussion

groups, but the only access here was en masse. Still, I wanted to really reach these students, ask them questions, start a discussion—bother them.

What did they expect? What did I provide for them? Cultural background? Literary expertise? I didn't project any screen shots or YouTube videos, and maybe I should have. I'm the kind of professor who likes chalking terms on a blackboard, but this is the 21st century. In my defense, I'd like to point out that students staring at a screen are far more passive than those talking and taking down notes. And it was hard getting them to talk, let alone argue a proposition. Almost everything was stated diffidently or deferentially, if at all. The well-known Japanese proverb *Deru kugi wa utareru* still held: "The protruding nail will be hammered." Compare that to "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," which I think of as quite American, whatever its origin, and you get why oral participation counts in so many classrooms in the U.S. and so few in Asia.

Assessment, which is to say grading, was an issue—is always an issue. The world of literature students is roughly divided into those with minds like steel traps, who never forget details, but who may lack a way to put them together; and those with minds like steel sieves, whose recall of a story is a blur, but who can analyze and make judgments if the data is right in front of them. Admittedly, the world also contains some rare talents who can handle everything, as well as some sad souls who don't appreciate literature. In any event, my job was to accommodate everyone. For instance, the midterm posed identification and comprehension questions like "What does this woman mean when she says that everything tastes like licorice?" or "Why is this man bothered by the question of whether Jesus exists?" I told the students that I wasn't interested in names and dates, that they should just nail down the answer any way they could, through a thumbnail description or a little context. And for what literary analysis is really all about, I supplied a close-reading exercise in which they were asked to make sense of one out of two unidentified passages and answer a couple of thematic questions. Here are the two excerpts:

It was late and everyone had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the daytime the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the

old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the café knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him

“Last week he tried to commit suicide,” one waiter said.

“Why?”

“He was in despair.”

“What about?”

“Nothing.”

“How do you know it was nothing?”

“He has plenty of money.”

[from Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”]

He flipped away the dead match and blew a stream of gray into the evening air. A sly look came over his face. “Lady,” he said, “nowadays, people’ll do anything anyways. I can tell you, my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain’t lying? How you know my name ain’t Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it’s not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain’t Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?”

“I don’t know nothing about you,” the old woman muttered, irked.

“Lady,” he said, “people don’t care how they lie. Maybe the best I can tell you is, I’m a man; but listen, lady,” he said and paused, and made his tone more ominous still, “what is a man?”

[from Flannery O’Connor’s “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”]

And here are the questions:

What is the author trying to convey regarding what people know about any individual and about existence in general? How does the passage compare with the material that you’ve read for class, and be specific. How does it compare with your own view of what you can know about others?

The students did well enough on rote memorization but sometimes fizzled on larger meanings. One abiding problem was how to talk about fiction difficult to get through because of vocabulary and strange cultural references. It was slow going, often with stories that, in any U.S. classroom, would probably

run half a session, at most. These classes occupied ninety minutes, and in some instances focused on one story over the course of two classes. To save time and to assist students who might not know, for instance, that Walgreens is a pharmacy chain, I provided a sheet with plot, characters, and a glossary. I should point out that many U.S. students are also clueless about references that the instructor may think obvious, such as that the Federal Pen is a prison. Nowadays, with greater smartphone and web access than in 2008, almost anything can be Googled. But given the differences in culture, era, and sensibility, I felt it necessary to define cotton gins, to explain that horse and foot means “completely,” and to point out the difference between Baptist and Episcopalian. In what Wikipedia would call disambiguation, I noted that lime isn’t just a fruit but also a calcium compound that reduces smells, and that toilet things may be items for keeping one’s appearance neat, such as a comb, brush, and razor. And these items were just part of the list from the Faulkner story. From the Erdrich story, I explained slang expressions like “no sweat” or “fast clip” or “a smokey” for a policeman. If some of the slang seemed dated, since a few of the stories were decades old, I tried to include a little history.

In Tokyo, I sometimes felt a little dated myself. My first visit to Japan had been back in 1981, a six-week internship at Takeda Chemical Company that I parlayed into a year-long job working for a teaching company in Osaka. I had been in between college and graduate school, temporarily at loose ends. When I returned over a quarter of a century later, I was considerably more tethered, a university professor with a wife and son who accompanied me on the trip. I also felt like Rip Van Winkle. The Japan I’d known now featured different architecture, the old *shōtengai* replaced by a row of chain stores. The dress code was different, a sort of mannered casual style. The technology looked like it came from a new century, as it had. And the slang I’d learned, like *inase* to mean way cool, was way old-fashioned. On the other hand, I recognized the same youth culture, straining against the invisible leash, finding ways to rebel without going too far.

I commuted from Yotsuya because I was also teaching at Sophia University, where the classes were smaller, the level of English was better, and they didn’t seem to need me as much. I’d take the subway, transfer once, get off at Gokokuji station, and walk from there. On the way, I’d pass by a park crowded

with greenery, a tatami maker whose shop smelled of fresh straw, and a traditional confectionary shop that seemed never to have any customers.

When I arrived at JWU, I'd set up shop in an improvised office: table, internet connection, and a few faded notebooks from a previous occupant. I'd prepare a little more for the class I'd already prepared for, but soon drift to the English department office, where people were always chatting, the kitchenette sink sieve choked with green tea leaves. The support system consisted of several extremely capable women who knew more English than they let on. At lunch, after class and before office hours, I made my way to the faculty cafeteria and sat next to whoever made room for me, joining in the inevitable conversations about vacation and the weather. Though some people complained about the food, lunch was part of my salary, and I was grateful for what was on hand. The student cafeteria across the way was far more elaborate, trendy, and Western, but I've always appreciated a piece of fish, a bowl of rice, and cooked vegetables.

With so many students, keeping track of individuals was difficult. Still, a few stuck out (in both the good and bad sense). I recall one young woman who always yawned like a narcoleptic and on several occasions put her head on the desk in front of her. I was told this was *inemuri* or sleeping in place, an honorable sign of overwork, that one has exhausted oneself in a good cause. But I never quite accepted that excuse and would rap on her portion of the table-desk when I passed by. Sometimes she would look up sorrowfully, sleepily, resigned. Once or twice she yawned as wide as the jaws of the lion guards on either side of temple gates.

Another young woman was rather withdrawn, having spent a few months in Wisconsin the previous year and still dreaming of that time. She wanted news from the U.S., facts about life there—anything. After class, I managed to feed her a few tidbits of celebrity gossip.

The most memorable was a tall woman in her mid-twenties whose written English was good but who spoke in the voice of a little bird. She was one of the only students who came to my mostly empty office hours, ostensibly to discuss the short stories we were reading for class, but the subject slowly shifted to her life. She lived in her family's house on the outskirts of Tokyo, working on a treatise about an uncle who'd been an important Buddhist

leader. JWU had no dress code, but this woman invariably wore a white blouse and black skirt, like a college version of the familiar high school uniform. When we said goodbye at the end of the semester, we exchanged a series of grave bows.

A lot of others occupied my attention at the time, but it's now been seven years. So many glimpses, so little prolonged contact.

The faculty I met only peripatetically, on my way to class or in the department office. They were always busy. They struck me as dedicated, hard-working, occasionally bemused, usually cheerful—like the good sports in our departments at home, only multiplied. Duty and obligation run strong in Japanese society, which makes it far harder for a faculty member to opt out of an activity, as so many do in the States.

I still correspond with Yoko Shirai, a veteran professor who was unfailingly courteous and kind (not the same thing). She took the time to explain the setup at JWU and greatly helped me with the short story course.

I also keep in touch with another professor, Ann Slater, an American expatriate who'd lived all over, but who had been in Tokyo for years and was working on a memoir. When our two families met at a café not far from where Ann lived, we had our first glimpse of a friendly Tokyo neighborhood where one could bring up children.

The faculty held an end-of-semester party at a lively restaurant, where I was warned ahead of time that I was expected to make an impromptu speech. I jotted down some valedictory notes, but the gist was about the students, which I think surprised some of the faculty. Though I didn't think much about it then, I wonder what it's like to be young, female, and majoring in English at a women's college in Tokyo. Crowded with structure, I imagine, though at times lonely with only a book for consolation.

Other questions from that time, I still think about: What does it mean to teach American literature in Japan? To teach context more than text? It became evident that some students wanted data about the USA more than about literature per se. I did what I could. To spur discussions about values? Or to provide vicarious experience, to project oneself onto a character—a person, say, in search of his sanity, having just run away with stolen property and frantically wondering what to do next. To vault beyond one's own life and

experience and, on returning, find a few connections that might not have been at first apparent.

Erdrich's story about a man on the run turned out to be one of the more popular topics to write about on the take-home final exam. They wanted to understand what was going through his mind. What does he mean by "the emptiness all around, and you in it, singing up from the bottom of a well"? Why does he abandon the car and the baby in the end, and why does he insist that the baby must've learned something from the experience? I returned the finals with copious annotations, but that was after the class was over, and I don't know how many read what I wrote. In any event, some learning takes place years after the instigation.

Memory is a curiously patchwork device, but one scene in particular stands out from my months at JWU, and it wasn't in the classroom at all. It was almost at the end of the semester, and I was riding the subway to Gokokuji. Hanging onto the overhead railing, I saw a seated young woman reading a book in English, first recognizing the anthology and then realizing that she was one of my students. I looked surreptitiously down to see what story she was reading. It was Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," about a girl chafing at her mother's advice about how to act like a lady, not a piece I'd assigned. As she reached to turn a page, she alternately frowned and smiled, as if trying on a role. The story wasn't for class; it was for her.