

“Holding a Mirror Up to Nature”: Illustrations of Realism
and Relevancy in American Short Fiction

Secondary educators and college instructors of literature may counter the question, “How is this relevant?” with answers that seem clear to them yet remain unconvincing to skeptics who fail to recognize the value of writing that reflects human flaws. Aside from the obvious answers of improving (or establishing) analytical skills, expanding vocabulary, and exposing students to more sophisticated composition styles, teachers may struggle to connect literature with life and forget Shakespeare’s conviction that art’s purpose is to hold “a mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet* III. ii. 22). Thus, the “Holding a Mirror Up to Nature” assignment challenges students to find the real counterpart of an American short story character and explore the comparisons and contrasts between the figures. Many discover that if they want to understand Andrea Yates, the Texas mother whose depressive psychosis led to murder, they should look to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” If the Washington snipers, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, remain mysteries, a hunting trip with General Zaroff in Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” would do much in understanding their pleasure in pursuing humans, and if the necrophilia of people like Dr. Carl Von Cosel seems too strange for fact, consider the mirrored behavior in Miss Emily Grierson from Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” By analyzing the motives of characters’ actions and their psychologies, students answer their own questions of literature’s relevancy and find the realism in fiction.

Upon first reading some fictional selections, students designate the works as “weird,” “unbelievable,” and in essence, “unrealistic.” However, they fail to see that “realistic fiction give[s] the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen”

(Abrams 269). Getting them to see the “reality” in fiction is quite a task, perhaps because minute details are so essential in understanding characters’ complexities, and in the age of sound bites, fifteen-minutes-of-fame moments, and instant messaging, few have been trained to examine, to contemplate, and to reflect on passages that make this apparent. Initial reads rarely reveal the realism and effectively, finding a character’s counterpart reflects realism back into the story. Through their research and examination of the narrative, students soon see that characters who at first seem too far from being real, suddenly become very realistic.

As a springboard for the topic and to demonstrate art as a reflection of life, Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” provides the genesis for this assignment. The story remains one of the most anthologized pieces in American Literature, yet few may know that the antagonist, Arnold Friend, is based on a murderer who preyed upon teens in the 1960s Southwest. For his ability to seduce girls, Charles Schmid was dubbed “The Pied Piper of Tucson” by writer, Don Moser, and this rapist and killer provided Oates with the predatory realized in Friend. She learned of the story in the March 4, 1966, issue of *LIFE*, and although she clearly takes Schmid’s trademark idiosyncrasies—gold car, stuffed boots, make-up, and imitative teenage language—to create Friend, she admits, “It was not after all the mass murderer who intrigued me, but the disturbing fact that a number of teenagers –from ‘good families’—aided and abetted his crimes. This is the sort of thing authorities and responsible citizens invariably call ‘inexplicable’ because they can’t find explanations for it. *They* would not have fallen under this maniac’s spell, after all” (Oates “When” 517). The worship of this psychotic hero by teens and the denial of adults who could not be captivated, speaks precisely to the reality that people *are* seduced by the criminal mind and countless TV shows: *CSI*, *Numb3rs*, *Cold Case*, *Law & Order*, cable’s *Forensic Files* and *Anatomy of a Crime* attest to America’s

growing fascination with the grotesque. The protection and admiration of Schmid by Tucson teens directly reflects the perverted glorification of figures such as Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, and OJ Simpson. The reality is that violence fascinates Americans, and brutal acts and their effects are reflected in fictional mirrors fashioned by Oates and others.

As Arnold Friend shares so many traits with typical sexual predators: older age, flashy car, smooth talk, and stylish dress, his match is too easy to find. Additionally, since the genesis of Oates' Friend is already known, students are not allowed to use Oates' story, and under no circumstances can they trace the origins of their chosen story since this undermines the challenge of finding their own. So, with restrictions in place, many venture onto the Internet trying to find the counterpart using basic physical descriptions. They quickly find that these general search terms do not produce viable results and are forced to form stronger connections by examining the characters' behaviors and motivations. Search terms evolve from the general into the specific, and by focusing on details of their choices that extend beyond the superficialities of dress, race, and gender, students usually get initial results by utilizing Google. Once they have a potential match, they begin researching books, credible web sites, articles, and to gain a deeper understanding of a character's complexities, they turn to literary scholarship for help. In examining the scholarship available on their short stories, students use the commentary to unlock the mysteries of the real counterparts who have been reported on but not necessarily analyzed in-depth. Beginning with characters drawn from culture, such as Arnold Friend, helps students understand the topic's objective: to bridge the gap between irrelevant works and the real world. While Oates marks a good starting point, the bridge can be further constructed by using Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Just as Oates draws a model for her antagonist from culture, so too does O'Connor when she creates The Misfit from numerous articles appearing in the *Atlanta Constitution* and *Atlanta Journal* during 1952. O'Connor draws The Misfit's moniker, gentlemanly conduct, spectacled look, and lack of memory regarding his crimes from a bank robber, a gun-toting maniac, and a house painter (Tate 441-3). Her character is an amalgamation of realistic features collected from criminals, James Yancey, James Francis ("Three-Gun") Hill, and Louis Roberts, whose exploits helped them grab headlines; however, the moment of grace exemplified in the Grandmother's reaching out to the Misfit is purely O'Connor, and the resolution shocks many first-time readers unfamiliar with her writing. In explaining this violence, O'Connor surmises, "I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ for each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (958).

The Grandmother's "moment of grace," her gesture of reaching out to The Misfit, "is unlike any in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies" and the core lies in the genuine concern the old lady suddenly feels for this criminal's condition (957). When she reaches out to him with her heart, she deserts the selfishness that motivates her to plead only for her life and to disregard the lives of her son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren. As the Grandmother finally thinks of someone other than herself, she cannot live beyond this moment; otherwise, she would have the opportunity to become the good woman The Misfit creates through her murder. She must die for the story to work, for the action of grace to be effective, but the question remains as to the motivations of those like The Misfit who destroy for pleasurable meanness.

This killer's destruction of an entire family would unfortunately compare with Perry Smith and Richard Hickock's murder of the Clutters of Kansas, a case chronicled in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. These stories pique a curiosity concerning criminals who harbor resentment from lives spent enduring abusive families, friends, lovers, employers, teachers, and even strangers. Eventually, their release of this rage too often falls on innocent people and the reasons for the crimes remain unknown—a point chillingly illustrated by Smith when he tells Capote: "I don't know why . . . And it wasn't because of anything the Clutters did. They never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it" (290). The bases for such heinous behavior remain mysteries, but the need for understanding the motive for murder contributes to the fascination of these examples, and the paper topic empowers students to take on the roles of investigators, psychologists and reporters to make connections where none seem possible.

One selection that may seem futile to even attempt a match features one of the most intriguing little old ladies in literature: Miss Emily Grierson from William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." With her supposed harmlessness, the townspeople do not suspect that she could be responsible for Homer Barron's disappearance, but when they break the door to the upstairs room to discover the "man himself" in Grierson's bed, they realize how very wrong they were about this "monument" of a woman (275; 269). With its surprising ending, Gothic setting, and grotesque character, the narrative is a favorite choice for the paper, but writers fear they will never make a match. Such was the concern of Allison Chandler, who acknowledges, "The main challenge I had was deciding on a fictional character that might have a real life example. Emily Grierson seemed outside of that possibility, so I was pleasantly surprised to find an example of her embodied in Count Von Cosel" (E-mail). Von Cosel, a German radiologist, became obsessed

with tuberculosis patient, Elena Hoyos, and when she died, he kept her body for seven years, performing gross acts that are far more erotic than Grierson's embrace of Barron ("Grierson" 1-2). Chandler finds a perfect match for Grierson in Von Cosel since both keep the bodies of their loved ones and dress them for marriage. Despite their gender differences, Grierson and Von Cosel's fixations remain their strongest connection since "In vain attempts to attain the love that Grierson and Von Cosel were denied when their lovers were alive, both resort to necrophilia" (3). The pairing truly illustrates that life can be stranger than fiction and the examples demonstrate the bizarre lengths some will go to in their pursuits of happiness.

General Zaroff develops his own unusual pursuit of happiness—much to the dismay of his prey, Sanger Rainsford, in Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game." As Zaroff grows bored with hunting animals, he turns to stalking the ultimate game, that which has "courage, cunning, and, above all, . . . reason" (15). Like Zaroff who kills his victims on Ship-Trap island, Robert Hansen enjoys hunting women in the remote wilderness of Alaska. Robert Walker makes this connection in "The Thrill of the Hunt: Zaroff and Hansen's Inhumane Obsession." By examining their physical appearances, operational settings, hunting strategies, trophy collecting (Zaroff's "collection of heads" and Hansen's souvenirs from his killings) and other commonalities, Walker shows how "Zaroff and Hansen share the psychological obsession of luring, tracking and killing their human prey to appease their hunger for power" (5, 1). The lust for power and the exhilaration of the chase help define the motives for Zaroff's and Hansen's reprehensible pastime. Their pleasures at their accomplishments are exemplified in Zaroff's boasts to Rainsford of his trophies and in the assortment of necklaces and bracelets Hansen keeps from his victims (5). As these trophies signify their skills as hunters and more importantly, "their triumph" over their victims, both men seem to "need these trophies or evidence to represent their

power” (5). Moreover, with each kill, “Zaroff’s and Hansen’s swelling hubris produce[s] a comfort zone for them” and ultimately, “Hansen’s overconfidence in kidnapping women led to [a victim’s] escape, and Zaroff, thinking [Rainsford] had drowned, lets his guard down to be killed in his own bedroom” (5-6).

The story’s resolution with Zaroff’s murder and the close of Hansen’s case with a sentence of “461 years in prison plus life,” conclude the actions of these psychopaths, but the true mystery of motive remains, despite the best efforts to explain these pathologies through lust-for-power theories and other such hypotheses (5). Undoubtedly, power is a provocative force when one chooses to take a life, and with the overwhelming number of deaths attributed to gun violence, Americans do play a most dangerous game of survival and witness the balances of power between criminals, courts, and commoners shift daily. Examples like the Washington snipers, Phoenix serial shootings, and gang drive-bys only confirm the realism of human prey that Connell explores in a narrative usually taught in middle school, but reintroducing it to college students proves rewarding since the work reflects the disturbing reality of senseless crime in America.

This topic has the pleasurable result of reviving works some may consider minor or lost. Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands,” has become a favorite choice, perhaps because students know of hometown cases in which teachers have been accused of sexual misconduct. This is not to say that Adolph Myers, Anderson’s shamed schoolteacher, is guilty of any crime against his students. Ambiguity remains one of the story’s most defining elements as the narrator never provides convincing evidence of Myers’ wrongdoing. Instead, the townspeople react to the dreams of a child infatuated with Myers, and after their interrogation of the boy, the mob runs the disgraced educator out of town. Assuming the identity of Wing Biddlebaum, Myers begins a

new life sans teaching—the career now destroyed by what could very well be a false accusation. Like Myers, Jaymee Lee Wallace, a teacher at Wharton High School in Tampa Bay, Florida, endured the shame of sexual misconduct allegations and the destruction of her teaching career as Melanie Caduhada uncovers in her essay, “Myers and Wallace: Tragedy of the Teacher.” Although others have made matches using cases from their hometowns and supporting this information from local news reports, Caduhada explains, “I first found out about the case by browsing through the Court TV Crime Library [web site]. . . . I then Googled Wallace’s name and found the local report in the Tampa newspaper. I recall the assignment being extremely difficult to research, and at first, I wasn’t sure the two would parallel” (E-mail). The two do parallel, and with a counterpart in place, Caduhada draws comparisons between the validity of accusations, evidence against the accused, and examines the professional and personal impacts these allegations have on Myers and Wallace. Caduhada explains that forming this thesis proved difficult until she realized “that it was the destruction of their careers along with the fact that neither was obviously guilty, that made the two cases work together; I researched the reliability of the polygraph to show that Wallace could be innocent. So, this assignment was probably the first really to challenge my ability to do college-level research, but once I found what I needed, the paper fell together from there” (E-mail). The paper reinforces the lack of evidence that ultimately convicts the two in the court of public opinion; by attacking the fantasies of the boy “who imagined unspeakable things” in Myers’ case and questioning the reliability of polygraph tests and establishing that Wallace’s accuser cannot produce any evidence of a relationship (letters, calls, messages), Caduhada asserts that the scarcity of proof fails to “validate the claims” against the two (“Myers” 2, 3, 5). What she shows in the comparison is that regardless of innocence or guilt, the mere accusations of sexual misconduct can be enough to stain a career

and force a teacher out of education. Even if the misconduct is never proven and the case dropped, the stigma remains, and for those like Myers and Wallace, the realized dream of being a teacher becomes one they can never again enjoy. Contrastingly, while it is the power of speech wielded by young people that destroy the lives of these adults, in other cases, adults annihilate the young or themselves because of psychological deterioration.

When the story of Andrea Yates drowning her five children broke in summer of 2001, readers familiar with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" may have experienced a chilling sense of *déjà vu* since the protagonist chronicles her experience with postpartum depression—a condition usually recognized as hysteria by male doctors of the nineteenth century. Gilman's piece reflects her experience with depression and the mental trauma stemming from her own "rest cure" treatment under the direction of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, whose advice resulted in Gilman coming "so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over" (Gilman, "Why" 879). While she admits that the story has "embellishments and additions," and she "never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations," her protagonist clearly envisions the shape that is ". . . like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern" (Gilman, "The Yellow" 311). As her mental state deteriorates into madness and the visions of the woman in the wallpaper appear more frequently, the narrator remains imprisoned in a room, separated from her baby, and treated as a child herself by her husband, John, who denies her illness. Like John, Rusty Yates seemingly denied the severity of Andrea's illness (urging her to have another child when doctors had warned against this) and she too was confined to living in close quarters when the family took up residence in a renovated bus. Of course, Yates' case was much more extreme and her psychosis led to five tragic murders, but students who make the Gilman-Yates connection are surprised that despite

over a century's separation, the stories mirror one another, as do other examples of women who famously suffer from PPD or PPS (recent examples include Brooke Shields). While Gilman's narrator and Yates offer an obvious comparison, some students venture into not-so-obvious territory and attempt to examine the mental and physical deterioration of the committed. Such is the link Aaron Edwards establishes in his paper, "Life Imitating Gilman's Art," where he compares the protagonist to Minnie Jung, a New Orleans native confined to an asylum in Jackson, Louisiana, during the 1880s. (Edwards 2). Gilman's narrative intrigued Edwards, who admits, "The complexities of the main character were just so interesting and well written that she was just asking to be investigated. Finding the counterpart, however, was not an easy task. I was able to find an online list of patients at an asylum from the 19th century and read through each one (a total just shy of 200), narrowing my choice down to a couple before going point by point with the information given on the patients to pick the closest match" (E-mail). Edwards matches the protagonist's counterpart in terms of historical context and explores Jung's descent into clinical insanity during the same time that Gilman undergoes Mitchell's rest cure. Edwards draws the connection between the narrator's belief that John's denial of her illness is partly to blame for her digression and Jung's psychological and emotional trauma in losing her fiancé. So parallel are their mental states that like Gilman's description of her protagonist's visions, "Jung's doctor details that since the death of her fiancé, 'her mind has been affected, getting worse and worse daily,' citing that she 'imagines that she sees the young man, that he is tormenting her, at times attempts to kill her'" (qtd. in Edwards, "Life" 3). Just as the narrator's paranoia and propensity for violent behavior progress, so do Jung's, and ultimately, as their minds give over to the freedoms in madness, they will remain physically imprisoned for the protection of others. Edwards recalls that the assignment "proved to be beneficial in developing my research skills,

more so than some of my other writing assignments. I remember trying to find something similar to the patient list I eventually found, but I had to really try to find it. From there, sifting through records was a bit tedious but was actually an activity that would later help with my history major. As cliché as it may sound, this assignment truly did build my abilities as a researcher, probably more than many other writing assignments” (E-mail). Again, students overwhelmingly attest that the challenges in finding and establishing a match make this an ideal assignment in helping them develop and sharpen their research skills.

One of the most difficult stories to research, but nonetheless, one of the most rewarding is Louise Erdrich’s “The Red Convertible,” a chapter from *Love Medicine*, in which Lyman tells of his brother, Henry, and his demise from Post-traumatic stress disorder following his experience as a POW in the Vietnam War. Lyman never reveals the details of Henry’s capture, but the change is evident as prior to his departure, the brothers buy the convertible and “took off driving all one whole summer. . . . Some people hang onto the details when they travel, but we didn’t let them bother us and just lived our everyday lives here to there” (Erdrich 261). Vietnam destroys Henry’s carefree lifestyle and Lyman notes that when his brother returns,

Henry was very different, and I’ll say this: the change was no good. You could hardly expect him to change for the better, I know. But he was quiet, so quiet, and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around. . . .now you couldn’t get him to laugh, or when he did, it was more the sound of a man choking, a sound that stopped up the throats of other people around him. They got to leaving him alone most of the time, and I didn’t blame them. It was a fact: Henry was jumpy and mean. (263)

In his mind, Henry still lives with the paranoia of the jungles and his PTSD worsens to the point of his suicide in the resolution. Finding an example of a vet destroyed by the war may seem an easy task, but the more difficult challenge resides in discovering a person who faces war as a minority. Moreover, the person's experience must be revealing enough to have garnered some publicity or news coverage. Women, African Americans, and of course, Native American soldiers work best in comparison with Henry. Brooke Anderson brilliantly tackled this challenge when she found the mirror image of Henry in Native American and Vietnam veteran, Delano Cummings. In her research, Anderson read Cummings' book, *Moon Dash Warrior*, in which he recounts his tour as a Marine and exposes his struggle to cope with the trauma that left him forever changed. She became so interested in Cummings' story that she located him through the Internet and conducted an interview via e-mail. Cummings was so impressed with Anderson's interest, that he read Erdrich's story to help understand her assignment. In reflecting on the paper and her research, Anderson "remember[s] being a little overwhelmed with the major assignment," but "when I interviewed Cummings, I was shocked by all the similarities I found in their stories and I became really interested in working on it! One of the most surprising associations I found between the fictional character and the real marine was their relationship to the river" (E-mail).

This remarkable similarity reveals the natural world's importance in Native American culture, but it also offers an insightful contrast. The river becomes the solidifying element between Henry and Cummings when Anderson notes, "Delano, like Henry, finds a sense of tranquility and serenity in their separate rivers. For both, it is a place to step away from the sounds, images, and feelings they remember for war. It is a place to forget completely about Vietnam, and focus on fishing, nature, or nothing at all, in Henry's circumstance. Henry knows

he can forget about Vietnam when he calmly drowns himself in the river” (“Relating” 5).

Although Henry uses the river to escape the trauma of a war that persists in his mind, Cummings finds familiarity and strength in the water and recalls, “I always felt good about the river, like I belonged there. When I was on the Lumber River I always felt like things would be OK, because the spirits of my ancestors were watching me over me along its banks” (qtd. in Anderson, “Relating” 6).

Despite the differences in their western and eastern tribe affiliations, Henry and Cummings connect through a natural element, an ethnic identity, veteran service, and sadly, as Anderson unveils, suicidal thoughts; however, while Henry’s life ends in the river, Cummings’ life continues, perhaps *because* of the river. As a fictional character, Henry represents the realism of war’s impact and the reality of what happens to soldiers who are psychologically wounded in battle and fail to receive the therapy needed to heal. Fortunately, Cummings stands in contrast to Henry’s example of loss, but there is no doubt that he lives with scars from a war that cannot be erased from America’s history or its psyche. Henry’s river (his tomb) flows as a reminder of the costs of war, and Anderson’s research and work demonstrate the infinite reflections concerning the human condition made in rivers that run through fiction as well as those that run through life.

With increasing numbers of students declaring majors in communications and business, the humanities continue to fall by the wayside, unable to establish relevancy for a generation completely seduced by the overblown American Dream, a prize clearly achieved with degrees that put dreamers on fast tracks to instant gratification, fame and fortune. Since undergraduates cannot envision the relevancy and realism of literature to life, they do not take time to study the diverse and intricate perspectives it offers on relationships, psychology and the human condition. Of course, what they fail to “see” is that the most successful people in any profession—business,

medicine, law, education—are those who solidify connections where none seemed possible, who use creativity to approach the most mundane problems, and who fashion solutions to seemingly unsolvable dilemmas. How are these skills formed and honed: through the type of careful, sometimes painstaking analysis that the study of literature demands. Of course, these fictional characters cannot explain the psychotic oddities of their factual counterparts, but they do offer the opportunity for students to investigate crimes, to assess behavior in the ways of psychologists, and to offer their perspectives on the connections between fact and fiction. Once they look into the mirrors literature offers, they see realism where it did not appear before and gain a greater understanding of how it *is* relevant in the examination of American life.

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