

THREE CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISES USING STEINBECK:

1. **Using an Objective Correlative**
2. **Making Your Setting Work for You**
3. **The “Right” Amount of Direction Characterization**

1. Creative Writing Exercise: Using an Objective Correlative

by Whitney Newton; Menlo School, Atherton, California, 2016

Objective

The purpose of the assignment is to allow students in a fiction writing course to intuitively grasp what an objective correlative is and to experience how it does economical emotional work in fiction. Further, they will sketch out a plan for an original short story (or, time permitting, they will write said short story) that relies on an objective correlative to do the heavy emotional lifting.

Overview

This lesson plan is designed for an upper-level creative writing class (11th or 12th grade). It can be executed over two seventy-minute sessions, including one night of homework, which will result in plans for stories (not finished stories). If you wanted students to produce finished stories, you could extend the writing time over a few more days.

Texts

- Steinbeck, John. “The Chrysanthemums” from *The Long Valley*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1995.
- Gingerich, Jon. “Understanding the Objective Correlative.” LitReactor. Web. 2012.

Procedures

Pre-Reading

Students will read and annotate Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums” as homework before arriving in class (can also be read in class). The teacher may choose to prompt students to look out for specific things: themes, symbols, setting, etc. For this lesson plan, symbols are the most germane, but you may want students to maintain a broad focus because this lesson works well in conjunction with “Creative Writing Exercise: Making Your Setting Work For You” (see below), which also uses “The Chrysanthemums.”

Next, as a group, students will read “Understanding the Objective Correlative” by Jon Gingerich (available online). The teacher should check for understanding by asking, “What is an objective correlative?” Allow for discussion before nailing down a definition on the board.

Next, ask students to discuss this question with a partner: “If there’s an objective correlative in ‘The Chrysanthemums,’ what is it?” Discuss answers, arriving (one hopes) at the flowers themselves. Further questions to probe with:

- What is Elisa feeling when the story ends? How do you know?
- What is she actually doing?
- Why must there be a discrepancy between the way Elisa feels and what she does?
- Why are the flowers an appropriate objective correlative for this story?

Writing

With the class time that remains, students will begin sketching out a plan for their own short stories that rely on objective correlatives. The teacher should be free to circulate among students to guide them. Homework that night is to complete a plan for that story, including the setting, the characters, the basic plot, and the objective correlative, plus a statement about what the author hopes to accomplish by using it.

Assessment

Students can be assessed on the success of their plans for stories. Did they select an objective correlative that is appropriate for the story and appropriately subtle? Will it create a heightened emotional experience for the reader that elevates the meaning of what literally happens in the story?

References

Steinbeck, John. “The Chrysanthemums” from *The Long Valley*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1995.

Gingerich, Jon. “Understanding the Objective Correlative.” LitReactor. Web. 2012.

2. Creative Writing Exercise: Making Your Setting Work for You *by Whitney Newton; Menlo School, Atherton, California, 2016*

Objective

The purpose of the assignment is to demonstrate to students in a fiction writing course how setting functions as more than a random or inert backdrop. By recognizing the role that setting plays in Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums,” students will see how descriptions of a place can support and enrich a story’s themes and tone. Further, students will write a descriptive opening for an original story, focusing on its setting in terms that foreshadow/highlight the story’s theme(s) and tone.

Overview

This lesson plan is designed for an upper-level creative writing class (11th or 12th grade). It can be executed in one seventy-minute sessions, including one night of homework, which will result

in a descriptive opening for a hypothetical short story. If you wanted students to produce finished stories, you could extend the writing time over a few more days.

Texts

- Steinbeck, John. “The Chrysanthemums” from *The Long Valley*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1995.
- Could easily be paired with any other short story in which the opening setting enhances (Márquez, “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings”) or ironically offsets (LeGuin’s, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”) the story’s themes and tone.

Procedures

Pre-Reading

Students will read and annotate Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums” as homework before arriving in class (can also be read in class). The teacher may choose to prompt students to look out for specific things: themes, symbols, setting, etc. For this lesson plan, setting is the most germane (themes and tone, too), but this lesson works well in conjunction with “Creative Writing Exercise: Using an Objective Correlative” (see above), which also uses “The Chrysanthemums.”

In groups, students will review the story with special attention to the opening paragraph on the setting. Key phrasing to unpack together:

- “closed off”
- “sat like a lid on the mountains”
- “made of the great valley a closed pot”
- “gang plows bit deep”
- “black earth shining like metal”
- “pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine”
- “December”
- “flamed”

(Note: It’s important to get students beyond describing the scene as merely “dark” or “negative” but to get more specifically at the implications of the diction.)

Questions to ask:

- What does this description set you up to expect?
- Does the story conform to your expectations or defy them?
- What language used to describe the setting could also apply to Elisa?
- If the story took place in spring or summer, would it matter? Why?

Writing

With the class time that remains, students will begin a descriptive opening that relies on the description of the setting to establish the piece’s tone and one or more important themes. Students do not need to finish the entire story but should complete a full enough description of the setting to establish it and the story’s trajectory clearly. If necessary, the student should jot down notes detailing how the plot will unfold and how the themes will be bolstered. Homework

that night is to complete and edit the opening, in addition to a brief statement about what the author hopes to accomplish with it.

Assessment

Students can be assessed on the success of their openings. Did they set an appropriate (or appropriately ironic/contrasting) tone for the narrative they are imagining? Will it create a heightened emotional experience for the reader that elevates the meaning of what literally happens in the story? Does the description of the place interact with the story?

References

Steinbeck, John. "The Chrysanthemums" from *The Long Valley*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1995.

3. Creative Writing Exercise: The "Right" Amount of Direct Characterization by Whitney Newton; Menlo School, Atherton, California, 2016

Objective

The purpose of the assignment is to present students with a set of character descriptions that lets them evaluate how much direct characterization by the author is "too much" vs. "the right amount." (Note: This lesson allows for subjective, variable student definitions of "the right amount," but a teacher could choose to take a more prescriptive approach.) By paring down one of Steinbeck's (arguably excessive) character descriptions from *The Grapes of Wrath*, students get a feel for how much physical description/direct characterization is necessary or ideal for a reader to "see" or "get" the character. Students will then write a character description that aims for the "right" balance of detail and implication.

Overview

This lesson plan is designed for an upper-level creative writing class (11th or 12th grade). It can be executed in two seventy-minute sessions, including one night of homework, which will result in an edited version of Steinbeck's description of either Pa Joad or Ma Joad (Chapter 8) and an original description of an original character.

Texts

- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1939.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," 1996.

Procedures

Reading and Drawing

Students will read and annotate the abstracted descriptions of Pa Joad and Ma Joad (Chapter 8), noting how much physical detail and direct characterization Steinbeck offers at once. Students

will each choose one of the two characters and will, individually, create portraits of him/her on a regular sheet of paper, including as much detail as possible.

Students will then read and annotate the description of Connie from Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been." Again, they will individually create portraits of her, including as much detail as they can imagine based on the description:

"Connie had long dark blond hair that drew anyone's eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk, which could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head; her mouth, which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out; her laugh, which was cynical and drawling at home—"Ha, ha, very funny,"—but highpitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet.

Group the portraits according to the characters they portray. Allow students to do a gallery walk of the collections.

Discussion

First, review the difference between Direct and Indirect Characterization.

Questions to explore:

- How much physical detail do you need to "see" a character?
- Which set of portraits are the "best"?
- Is "most accurate" the same thing as the "best"?
- Which of these characters do you feel that you know best via the description?
- Are there things about the character that you don't want the author to tell you? Or details that don't matter to your mental image?
- If an author omits a detail about a character, how do you supply it?
- Do you like/appreciate non-physical descriptions of a character (e.g., Ma Joad's), or do you feel condescended to by the author? As though the author can't trust you to understand how to feel about the character via indirect characterization?

Writing

First, students will choose to "revise" Steinbeck's description of either Ma or Pa Joad. By paring away words and details, students will attempt to achieve a more efficient description that still conveys the fullness of each character. They should share and discuss their work to evaluate its success and whether anything has been lost in the process.

With the class time that remains (if any), students will begin a description of an original character that aims to achieve the student's definition of "the right amount" of direct characterization. The character description can be finished for homework and shared/discussed during the next class session.

Assessment

Students can be assessed on the success of their character descriptions, both of Ma/Pa Joad and of their original characters. Did they choose the most essential details and dispense with the rest? Did they bring the word count down sufficiently? Is the resulting character more clear than ambiguous? Are the blanks acceptable? Can you see beyond the physical of the character?

References

- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Penguin Books: New York, New York, 1939.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," 1996.