CHAPTER 1

Teaching Literature with Short Texts

Yet a story’s very shortness ensures its largeness of accomplishment, its selfhood, and purity.

—LORRIE MOORE

Picture the scene twenty years ago. I am reading aloud Roald Dahl’s wonderfully twisted short story “Lamb to the Slaughter” to my junior high students. In the story made famous in an Alfred Hitchcock television program, a woman clubs her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, then covers the crime by roasting the meat as she chats innocently with the police detectives. I read it aloud as the students follow along with their copies, rain streaming down the lone window in the classroom. When I am finished, there is a hushed silence, which erupts thirty seconds later into questions, comments, theories, reactions. Students call out, “Do you think the wife will really get away with it?” “I think the husband deserved it.” “Who wrote this story? I love how the cops at the end are eating the murder weapon.” “Can we hear the story again so we can listen for clues?” “Cool story—got any more by this guy?” And I did have more. We went on
to read “The Way Up to Heaven” by Roald Dahl, which students also admired for its surprising revenge ending. We then explored Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” a story that haunted students for the remainder of the year. Its misleading lead, which paints a portrait of an idyllic summer day as a community gathers, sets up the shocking ending in a way that intrigued the seventh and eighth graders.

We read many short stories that first year of my teaching career, and every year after. As an English major, I didn’t read very many short stories in college. Literature courses I took focused on novels and the occasional poem. As I entered my first classroom as a teacher, in a junior high located on Main Street in a small, rural Oregon town, I pictured myself sitting in a circle, engaged in a lively discussion with my eager young students about whatever novel we were reading. I was shocked to discover that the junior high had no classroom sets of novels for my students to read. Literature was not the focus of the junior high curriculum; the emphasis was on writing, spelling, and grammar. In fact, sentence diagramming was a mandate; students were required to pass sentence-diagramming tests.

While hunting for a teacher’s edition of the grammar book so I could learn how to diagram sentences in an effort to support my students, I stumbled across a dusty copy of a short story collection. Hidden inside the tattered green cloth covers were stories—stories that became the glittering gems in an otherwise tedious march through formulaic writing prompts, weekly spelling pre- and post-tests, and the grammar focus of the month.

Short stories provided more than a distraction from the grammar and writing formulas. Students were identifying the elements of short stories: character, setting, plot, and theme. They were discovering literary elements: irony, foreshadowing, and point of view. They were noticing writing craft: a compelling lead, surprise endings, and the use of descriptive language. They were also making text-self connections, identifying with characters, and seeing how the character’s decisions were related to their own lives. Short stories were a way into literature for these students. They are a way into literature for most students.

When I moved from teaching at the junior high to teaching at the high school, I brought my passion for short stories with me. Fortunately, the literature anthologies I was required to use, although unwieldy in size and weight, were rich with short stories. I supplemented the anthologies with short stories I had grown to love. Poetry was another form of short text that had served my junior high students well. Again I used the anthology but also used my limited copying budget
to provide students with poetry not contained in the anthology. In addition to the anthology reading, novels were a literature focus. And the novels that were required were the same novels I had read in high school: *Great Expectations*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Scarlet Letter*. Each year we also taught at least one play: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Our Town*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*.

Although many of these longer works were favorites of mine, I was struck by the difference in how students read and responded to these longer texts. The participation level during discussions of longer texts was significantly less than when we were discussing short texts. When I queried students about the assigned reading in longer texts, they were candid in sharing that they had read the text but could not retain all the details, so they did not feel comfortable talking in class. And some students admitted that they had not done the reading. Students were frank about the sense of frustration they felt as they read; they were overwhelmed by the complexity of the multiple characters, settings, and plot twists. But the more common response to longer texts was an intense dislike for the text—a dislike that grew in intensity the longer we worked with the text.

I empathized with the students’ complaints. As an English major I had read many books that I disliked. But I also recognized that despite my dislike for the text, I learned from these authors. And although I did not want my students to be frustrated, I did want them to be pushed as readers so they could develop reading skills that would support reading complex texts. So I clung to the inclusion of longer texts, but I worked to pick books I thought would have greater interest for more students than the traditional texts seemed to have; for example, I traded *Great Expectations* for *A Separate Peace* in my freshman English class. I also paid attention to reading strategies, although I realize now, after reading Cris Tovani’s wonderful work *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* (2000), that there was much more I should have done.

But the distinction between who we were as a literature community when we read and discussed short stories and poetry and who we were when we were immersed in reading a novel continued to fascinate me. Students dug deep when they spoke about short stories and poetry. They referred to the text in support of their answers. They spoke about the craft of the writing, noting how figurative language, foreshadowing, irony, and point of view contributed to the literature’s effect. Students were engaged in literature appreciation and analysis. And the
short texts we read were often complex and required close attention using the reading strategies we were exploring, in particular text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.

I found myself using more and more short texts because their length supports in-class reading—reading that can be supported with reading strategies. And short texts’ length supports in-class discussion, often on the same day the short text is read, in development of an appreciation for literature. An emphasis on short texts allowed me to include classic authors as well as multicultural and contemporary works. Rather than reading less with short text, my students were reading more. I also appreciated the fact that reliance on reading supplements such as SparkNotes and online summaries and essays was reduced. I was saddened to discover that there are online essays about short texts, particularly short stories, but these can be avoided if I am creative in my framing of the response to literature (see section entitled “Writing in Response to Literature” in Chapter 2 for more on this).

**Beyond Fake Reading**

Short texts were also a response to fake reading. I found that in-class reading of short texts allowed me to observe my students as readers. And, if needed, I could intervene, with individuals and with the whole class. For one of my students—I’ll call him Fred—reading in class resulted in my discovering that he could not read. It was early fall, and I had just assigned an in-class reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Minister’s Black Veil.” This is not an easy read, so I had talked with students about focusing their attention on the references to the veil; they were marking these references with sticky notes (see Chapter 3 for more on this story and reading strategy). I circulated as students read, noting how they were using the sticky notes. I noticed Fred shifting in his chair; his eyes moved from the page in the book to the desk of the student next to him. I watched as he picked up his sticky note, looked again at the student sitting next to him, and placed the sticky note in the same place as the other student. He then stared down at the book for several minutes. I asked Fred to stay after class and talk with me. As he sat down in the chair next to my desk, I noted his anxiety. “Fred, thanks so much for staying after class today. I haven’t had the opportunity to work with you before, so I wanted to spend a few minutes finding out more about you as a reader. Over the course of the year I ask all of my students to sit down and read with me.
So today is your day. I would like you to read the first paragraph of the story we read in class today aloud to me. I know reading aloud is a different reading skill than silent reading, but this is helpful information for me and I really like hearing this story.” Fred did not look up from the floor; his eyes had been focused on the green carpet in my classroom since he sat down. I handed him the literature anthology. Silence. I waited. More silence. “Fred, would you prefer to read the first paragraph silently and tell me what you read? We can start there?” Silence. “Fred, tell me how I can help you.”

Fred responded, his eyes still focused on the floor, “Mrs. Campbell, the words in this story are really confusing. I . . .” His voice broke as he turned to look at me. “I don’t think I know how to read.” I thanked Fred for his honesty as my eyes welled up with tears, and I assured him that I would help him learn to read.

I acknowledge that Fred’s situation is unique. But Fred, whose first language is English, had attended public school since the first grade. He was then a junior in high school. And Fred could not read. He was a charming, sociable boy who had developed coping skills to cover his lack of literacy skills. Fred’s story is just one example of the range of abilities my students brought to literature reading. I worked with students who could read in their native language but not English, students who could not read in their native language or English, and students who were native English speakers but, like Fred, struggled with reading. Asking these students to read a novel that would challenge a reader with excellent reading skills is not why I became a teacher. Short texts were the way for me to address the varying reading abilities in my classroom. I read short texts aloud to the whole class and to small groups. I taught reading strategies that we then applied in class as we read short texts. I formed literature circles that read a variety of short texts with different reading challenges. I arranged to have short texts read on tape and even translated into my students’ native languages. Short texts served as the great equalizer.

Meeting the Objectives for Teaching Literature
Please know that this move to the inclusion of—even dominance of—short texts in my literature classroom was slow and at times agonizing for me. I adore reading novels. My bookshelves are heavy with novels. I want my students to discover the joys of immersing themselves in a book, of embracing the complexities of a well-crafted novel. But the realities of my classroom made me question whether the
dominance of novels served my students well. Immersing my students for weeks at a time in a novel was unwieldy. Rather than digging deep, students’ discussions often skimmed over the surface of hundreds of pages of reading, or they relied on me to tell them what matters in the book. And I certainly did not resist telling them. At times I found myself having a discussion about the novel with myself!

But was I serving my students well by making literature reading more accessible? Was I lowering my expectations? I worried that my emphasis on short texts was promoting the equivalent of literary fast food.

As I wrestled with the question of which literature to read, I realized I had neglected to ask myself the more important question: what do I want my students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of their reading of literature? I began to compile a list of objectives for reading literature:

- Students will develop a variety of reading strategies in support of comprehension.
- Students will identify literary terms and examine how these terms contribute to the craft of writing.
- Students will develop skills in support of analyzing literature.
- Students will develop discussion skills that enable them to converse with peers about the literature they read.
- Students will discover connections with the literature they read: text to self, text to text, and text to world.
- Students will recognize the role literature plays in telling the story of cultures.
- Students will read literature as a model for the kinds of writing they are doing.

When I looked at this list of objectives, I realized that I needed to expand rather than narrow my list of literature choices. In addition to short stories, poetry, and the occasional novel or play, I needed to include literature that modeled the kinds of writing my students were doing: responses to literature, persuasive and expository essays, personal narratives, and memoirs. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA) standards also support this broad range of literature in calling for a “wide range of literature from many periods and genres” (Standard 2, 1996; see further discussion of standards in Chapter 2). This variety of writing is reflective of what is published
as literature. Bookstores and libraries recognize that literature is not limited to the novel. I also needed to include texts that reflected the changing landscape of literature—literature written for young adults and graphic novels, illustrated stories that bring together the best of comic books and great literature.

My classroom practice changed because my students demonstrated they needed a different approach to literature. They wanted to read well-crafted, accessible texts that supported the development of their reading skills and modeled writing craft they could emulate in their own writing. They wanted a greater variety of texts so that they could connect with the texts we read but also be introduced to ideas and cultures that went beyond their experience. They wanted short texts that they could read and reread—discovering all the possibilities of great writing. They wanted a classroom that reflected the rich range of literature that exists outside of the classroom. As one of my resistant readers, Jason, noted, “I got to admit, it’s weird to be in this class. I am actually saying stuff about what we read because for the first time, I have actually read the stuff.” And when we did read a novel as a class, _Their Eyes Were Watching God_, Jason announced to the class, “This is the first English-class book I have ever finished.”

Short texts allowed all of my students to come to the literature table—where we dined not on fast food, but on a delicious buffet that represented the smorgasbord of literature genres available to us as readers.

It’s my hope this book will support your interest in and efforts to bring short texts into your classroom, to build on what you are already doing. I’ve included an overview chapter, which discusses the structures and strategies I used in my literature workshop to support our short texts study. The subsequent chapters focus on short texts by genre. Each chapter includes an overview of the genre and a series of teaching strategies in support of the genre, including reading strategies and strategies to analyze literary elements and writing craft. Informal assessments are woven into the teaching strategies. Recommended texts are listed in sidebars as well as in resource lists at the end of each chapter. Many of the works in these lists, especially older works, have been published in many different editions and collections over the years. I’ve included the editions that I’ve used, so the publication dates are often not the original publication dates. When you look for these older works, you’ll find they’re available in many different collections and editions. Please note that I did attempt to reference collections that contain a number of the shorter text selections. As I compiled these lists I was aware that
I was just scratching the surface of the rich literature resources available to us. I hope these lists will build on the literature you are already using.

I am confident you’ll adapt and tweak the teaching strategies and resources I describe to meet the needs of the diverse students with whom you work. My hope is that you’ll find the time to send me a note or an email and let me know what you’re doing with short texts. I wanted to include a pound of really good coffee with every book, but the publishers said this would not be practical. So I trust you are sipping a good cup of coffee or tea as you read (I drank Sumatran-blend coffee while writing this book). May you find confirmation for what you are already doing as well as inspiration to use more short texts in your classroom.

WORKS CITED


