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Short Story

Dialogue in Fiction

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Abstract:

This close-reading and discussion-oriented lesson, which takes between sixty and seventy minutes, uses Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” as a model of how dialogue advances plot and develops character in fiction. It is useful in literature classrooms for its emphasis on drawing inferences from text and in creative writing contexts for teaching effective dialogue writing. This lesson is suitable for grades 9-12.

Standards:

SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

L.9-10.6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

L.11-12.3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

RL.9-10.5. Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

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 meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Procedure:

Students should either have read “Hills Like White Elephants” or been given several minutes at the start of class (ten should be sufficient) to read and annotate the story. This particular story is well-known for its deeply embedded, implied conflict and tends to provoke confusion and inquiry. To help students understand the story better, and to introduce the theory that this exercise relies upon, share [Kurt Vonnegut’s “Eight Basics of Creative Writing”](#) (link also supplied below in “Materials”). Ask them to focus on the fourth maxim – “Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action” – and challenge them to apply it to the dialogue in “Hills” through the following activity.

Split your class into several small groups, with no more than three students in each. Divide the short story into manageable sections (it is very short, and so four sections would be a good size; begin and end these sections where you see fit). Then, challenge each group to re-read a specific assigned section with the goal of determining how each line of dialogue either advances the action of the story or reveals something about the characters. As the groups review the dialogue and discuss how to classify what they see, they need to prepare explanations of why they see a given line as doing one thing versus another. Chances are good students will find the binary rather blurry in places. Some may ask if a line of dialogue can’t actually do *both* these things. The answer, naturally, is yes; keep challenging the students to come to consensus about each line, though. If they feel they have permission to say “it’s some of both” to each line, close-reading and analysis (the real labor of this activity) will take a back seat to expedience.

After the students have had adequate time to review and discuss their section of the story (this could take anywhere from ten to twenty minutes, perhaps longer), gather the class back into a large group and begin discussing the story, beginning to end, with each group explaining the purpose it assigned to the lines in its section. Take notes on the chalk or white board so students can see trends in how we explain what’s going on in the text, how Hemingway uses his characters’ voices, whether characterization and plot trade off equally or if one dominates over another in places. As groups report out, encourage students in other groups to respond to classifications that seem strange or inadequately thoughtful. Model this kind of critical engagement yourself so the students will see there’s room for argument. Ultimately, even if your students did not ask if dialogue can *both* advance plot and character, the discussion should reveal this. That complexity should be stressed as further evidence of thoughtful story craftsmanship – stories built to ensure all elements serve a clear purpose.

Materials:

A classroom with a chalk or white board for recording notes in the all-class debrief.

Photocopies or digital copies of Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” (.pdf included in the “Short Story” unit on the Digital Commons)

Access to Kurt Vonnegut’s “Eight Basics of Creative Writing” (via projection from the website, printed handouts, or notations provided on the board). Link live as of 6/6/13:
<http://www.writingclasses.com/InformationPages/index.php/PageID/538>