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The Short Story
Magical Realism Creative Exercise

“My Life with My Cell Phone”: Creating a Magical Realist Story

Abstract:

In this lesson students are introduced to the basic elements of magical realism, a genre that combines fantastical events with the mundane normalcy of life. Students examine Octavio Paz’s short story “My Life with the Wave” as an example of the genre. In the story, the narrator travels to the ocean and falls in love with a wave, whom he bottles and takes home with him; the two go on to both cherish each other and fight terribly. After discussing the story, students create, in groups, plot sketches for their own adaptations. Students might imagine relationships with cell phones, the sun, or college applications, for example. Given time, students could also write the story, either individually or in groups. Overall, the lesson challenges students to engage with magical realism by creatively adapting a classic of the style.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3](#) Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7](#) Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3a](#) Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

Procedure:

Students should read Octavio Paz’s story “My Life with the Wave” to start. To begin the discussion, consider asking what students find magical, and what they find realistic, about the story. Obviously enough, the story is fantastical, or magical, because it presents a love affair between a man and some water. The story personifies the wave, and asks us to imagine her leaping around the room with frustration, or pooling and surrounding the man as a gesture of affection. Clearly, there is magic here. At the same time, many aspects, such as the personality differences between the man and the wave, the man’s difficulty in traveling with the wave, and couple’s relationship troubles, will likely seem real and authentic to students: these aspects seem very familiar because they call on our common understanding of people, travel, relationships. The story affirms our logic and reasonableness as it presents these aspects in legible ways.

After discussing the ways in which the story is both magical and realistic, put students into groups (threes seem to work well) and challenge them to create their own version of the story. Each group should choose two different objects to create two different adaptations of the story:

“My Life with My Cell Phone,” “My Life with the Wind,” etc. (Feel free to offer some suggestions here: the sun, dress shoes, vending machine, rain, college applications, Chicago Bulls, lunch line, sunglasses.) Their challenge is to sketch out a plot line that captures some plausible aspects of a romantic relationship with this object, while also honoring the strangeness of that romance. For example, what about a cell phone is entrancing? What is maddening about a cell phone? How might one fall in love, and later out of love, with a cell phone? Groups should find ways to work in these connections to the offbeat love connection.

Students should present these plotlines to each other. The audience can make additional suggestions or ask questions. Additionally, if there is time, students might choose an object that interests them and write up a draft of the story.