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Short Story

Setting as Character

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Abstract:

This lesson uses Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" to explore tone and characterization in short fiction. It requires students to demonstrate an understanding of the role character plays in fiction and to use specific textual evidence to support a claim. The lesson can be completed in a single class period of fifty to seventy minutes and is suitable for grades 9-12.

Standards:

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.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 will need to have read "Young Goodman Brown" before class. It may be useful to begin a discussion of story elements students found challenging, so as to establish some baseline of understanding about what appears to happen to Goodman Brown during his night in the forest surrounding Salem village. It's not necessary to achieve consensus about the text – in fact, that could be detrimental to students thinking about it in their own creative, insightful ways.

Open a discussion of character and characterization by asking the students to mine the text for information that helps them describe what Goodman Brown is like – or his wife, Faith, if you prefer. As students share their data, record it on the board, noting which details seem to be about mannerism, appearance, language use, emotion, action, and so on. Treat this as a review of what students commonly understand characters to be: persons with identifiable attributes, needs, desires, actions, objectives. Now complicate the discussion of character by sharing this definition, excerpted from *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, 2*nd *edition,* edited by Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray:

> In its most general literary sense, a character is a figure in a literary work. That figure need not be human, although most characters are. Characters may be nonhuman animals or even nonliving entities, provided that the author characterizes them by giving them the attributes of a human individual. *Character* also carries the nonliterary **connotation** of personality and even of morality (or lack thereof) – hence, we speak of persons of good, bad, and "shady" character. (53, emphasis in original)

Clearly, the forest of "Young Goodman Brown" is assigned a certain ominous importance by Hawthorne. Many of its descriptions and much of its content seem in keeping with this broader definition of character.

Challenge your students, either independently or in pairs, to find evidence that describes the character of the forest. Ask them to focus on specific language choices, the tone of certain words (eg., Hawthorne says the narrow forest path "creeps" through the gloomy trees – why creeps? Why is that different from a path that tiptoes, or one that slithers, or one that cuts?), the "history" or "backstory" associated with the forest. And so on. Move around the groups, checking on their progress and helping them synthesize these various pieces of the text into some clear statement. For example, "The forest is a fundamentally sinister character, known to shelter dark secrets and hypocrisy." Ask the students to consider how they would describe the forest's "motives," or if they feel it truly has any.

After all the students or groups have had the chance to mine the text for evidence and draw up some specific claims, have the students write a brief sentence (like the one above) that encapsulates their findings on the board. This mural of thoughts can become a springboard for discussing the common themes this "character" portrays in the story, how this "character" interacts with its human counterparts, how much our understanding of it is clarified – or confused – by Goodman Brown's experience, and so on.

This lesson concept can be applied to many others texts. The author of the lesson first used this structure in a Speculative Fiction Studies course when analyzing the style of H.P. Lovecraft; indeed, the intensity of tone and mood in setting makes this kind of analysis very well-suited to Gothic literature of all kinds.

Materials:

 A classroom with a chalk or white board for recording notes.

Photocopies or digital copies of "Young Goodman Brown" (.pdf included in the "Short Story" unit on the Digital Commons – originally obtained from http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/ygb.html, date of access 6/6/13)

Access for students to partial definition of character (quoted above) – can be put into a handout, worksheet, prompt, or simply written or projected on the board. Given the length of the quote, reading it aloud is probably not best for student recall.