

TEACHING THE SHORT STORY* (a demonstration lesson)

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The following is a resume of a lesson given over 80 minutes (2 x 40 min. periods) to a Form IV Arts class in an English-medium school in Petaling Jaya. The observers were some 60 students in the English Methods group doing their Diploma in Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya.

I have not thought it necessary to explain here the principles or theories underlying the lesson, since these may be inferred from the description of the aims and the conduct of the lesson. Further, although I have tried to give as many details as possible in the early part of the résumé, I still feel that this does scant justice to the actual dynamics of the lesson.

Finally, it was my intention to demonstrate the use of a wide a variety of approaches and activities as was possible within the time allotted and the limits imposed by the content of the lesson itself. I leave it to the reader to identify these on his own.

Lesson Aims

Generally, the lesson was aimed at the pupils' comprehension and appreciation of the particular short story, including the main features of the short story as a literary genre. In specific terms, the pupils were expected to attain the following objectives:

1. awareness and appreciation of the experience suggested by the story, theme and form
2. recognition of the several features that make up the whole. e.g. plot, characters, setting, theme, etc.

Conduct of the lesson

I By way of introduction, and inducing a mental 'set', I felt it necessary to find some way by which the class could be gradually guided from a self-consciousness at being observed to a state when they would attend to the lesson proper. The meeting point, as it were, I found in a question which could be taken, without being too far-fetched, or idiosyncratic, at two levels of meaning

corresponding to the two situations. Thus I began with a few inconsequential questions, leading to the (overwhelming?):

WHY ARE WE HERE? (This was written on the board.) A brief oral question-and-answer session between teacher and pupils followed, the responses from the class being, as was to be expected, entirely confined to the immediate level of significance. Whence the following summing up:

Teacher: 'As I see it, from your answers, I am here to teach, you are here to learn, and the students at the back are here to observe us. There can be, however, another meaning to the question, the answer to which will be suggested in this short story which I'm going to read to you.'

(Read aloud the first three paragraphs. For reasons that will be apparent shortly, the class had not yet been given the text of the story. Individual pupils were then asked to state the three questions posed in the foregoing paragraphs, and the questions were put up on the board.)

Teacher: 'Now, say after me,
What is the right time (for every action)?
Who are the most important people?
What is the most important thing to do?'

Class repeated these in chorus.

II. *Teacher:* 'Now imagine you are the learned men, or the learned women (it was a mixed class). Can you think what answers you'd give to these questions? Very briefly, one question, one answer, a word, a phrase, or a sentence. You may prefer to write it out on a piece of paper, or you could answer it straight off.'

Most pupils had fairly obvious answers to the first question, i.e. 'Now', 'As soon as possible', etc. The second question yielded answers like 'The Prime Minister', and, commendable for its frankness at least, 'To make as much money as possible'.

III. *Teacher:* 'Well, let us see how the author works out the answers to these questions.' (Distributed a

*"Three Questions" by Leo Tolstoy, in "Twenty-three Tales", Jaico Publications, Bombay, 1957.

cyclostyled copy of the text to each pupil). 'Read through the story quickly, and silently, try to get a rough idea of the story, and a few details here and there. Never mind the difficult words – there are very few here, in any case – or anything else that's troublesome.

(This took up eight minutes, a fair sample of questions having ascertained that some pupils had finished the first reading at the end of the fourth and fifth minutes. The teacher then read the last paragraph aloud, adding, in his own words, "And that's why we are here, in this world, this life").

A brief pause followed, the idea being to allow the experience of the story to 'sink in'.

IV. Individual pupils were asked the meanings of selected words and phrases. There were very few, the full list being the following: 'It once occurred to a (C)lain King', 'undertake', 'proclaimed', 'learned men', 'a Council of wise men', 'Equally various were the answers', recommenced', 'he crouched down on the threshold'. As suggested earlier, the story was chosen, among other things, for the appropriateness of the language to the level of the class and also for rapid silent reading.

V. *Teacher* (continuing): 'Let's go back to the three questions you took down. Would you read aloud the exact words of the author's questions and the answers he has given, and copy the answers in your notebook?'

Three pupils read the questions and the answers separately, and the class wrote down the answers.

(A five-minute break followed, at the end of the first period)

VI. *Teacher* (resuming the lesson): 'I wonder how many of you know who the author of the story is?'

(None of the pupils, it appeared, had read the story previously.) 'Well, it's the Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, and this story is from this collection.' (Teacher then passed the book round the class, and while this was going on, gave a very brief and simple sketch of the author's background, with the aid of three pictures illustrating important phases in Tolstoy's life and work.

The rest of the lesson may be summarised as follows:

VII Oral question-and-answer, and examination of the text, to direct pupils towards identifying the 'people' in the story, and deciding which of them were major and which minor characters.

VIII. Pupils were asked to imagine themselves to be T.V. or motion-picture cameramen, and to decide on the

specific scenes in which the main events might have taken place. One of these was to be found in the story itself, but the other two had to be filled in. At the end, the following suggestions and observations were put up on the board, and class noted these down.

Scene 1 – the king contemplating the questions – in his bedroom/study/garden/palace/anywhere.

Scene 2 – the king listening to the wise men – in his study/great hall/audience chamber.

Scene 3 – the king meeting the hermit – in a wood, with a hermit's cell (given in the text).

The teacher then showed the class pictures depicting some of these scenes of Russian life.

IX. The next step was taken up with the pupils' attempts to construct an outline of the plot, the teacher writing on the board each statement as it was given by a pupil, and together with the class, improving the language in each. Thus by the time this ended, the following outline had emerged:

Outline of the Plot

1. The king asks himself three questions.
2. The king consults the learned men.
3. The king consults the hermit.
4. The king digs the ground for the hermit.
5. A bearded man runs towards the hermit's cell.
6. The king tends the wounds of the bearded man.
7. The bearded man tells his story.
8. The hermit answers the three questions.

(The language and structures – Subject-Verb-Complement of the sentences were deliberately simple, for the sake of clarity.)

X. Similar procedures were adopted in connection with the time, atmosphere and theme of the story. These were perhaps dealt with a little hurriedly, and so cursorily. Normally, they would have been better taken at another 40-minute lesson, but I was aiming at a unity in the demonstration lesson.

XI. The lesson concluded with an attempt to relate the theme to the immediate present (for relevance) and also to the beginning of the lesson (as recapitulation). The teacher asked the three questions again, and invited the pupils to give their own answers. The pupils revealed that they had got the point of the story in that they were able, in response, to say that the most important time was 'Now', the most important people were 'Whoever we are with', and the most important action 'To do good'.