



INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL
TO ACCOMPANY
BACKPACK
LITERATURE

SIXTH EDITION





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LITERATURE

*An Introduction to Fiction,
Poetry, Drama, and Writing*

SIXTH EDITION

X. J. Kennedy

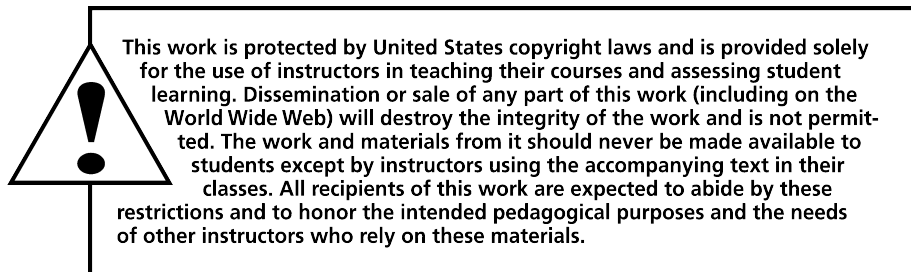
Dorothy M. Kennedy

Dana Gioia
University of Southern California

Dan Stone

with Michael Palma





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ISBN-13: 978-0-13-477247-9
ISBN-10: 0-13-477247-4

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PREFACE

We've always found, before teaching a knotty piece of literature, that no preparation is more helpful than to sit down and discuss it with a colleague or two. If this manual supplies you with such a colleague at inconvenient hours, such as 2:00 A.M., when there's no one in the faculty coffee room, it will be doing its job.

This manual tries to provide exactly that sort of collegial conversation—spirited but specific, informal but informed. We offer you a sheaf of diverse notes to supply—if you want them—classroom strategies, critical comments, biographical information, historical context, and a few homemade opinions. These last may be wrong, but we set them down to give you something clear-cut with which to agree or disagree. Candor, we think, helps to enliven any conversation.

The manual includes:

- Commentary on every story, poem, and play presented in the text, except for a few brief poems quoted in the text as illustrations;
- Additional classroom questions and discussion strategies;
- Thematic Indices at the beginning of the “Fiction” and “Poetry” sections.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

There is a plan to *Literature*, but the book does not oblige you to follow it. Chapters may be taken up in any sequence; some instructors like to intersperse poetry and plays with stories. Some may wish to teach Chapter 21 on “Myth” immediately before teaching *Oedipus the King*. Many find that “Imagery” is a useful chapter with which to begin teaching poetry. Instructors who prefer to organize the course by theme will want to consult the detailed thematic indices.

If, because you skip around in the book, students encounter a term unknown to them, let them look it up in the Index of Terms. They will be directed to the page where it first occurs and where it will be defined and illustrated.

In the poetry chapters, the sections titled “For Review and Further Study” do not review the whole book up to that moment; they review only the main points of the chapter. Most of these sections contain some poems that are a little more difficult than those in the body of that chapter.

TEXTS AND EDITORIAL POLICY

Spelling has been modernized and rendered American, unless to do so would change the sound of a word. Untitled poems are identified by their first lines, except for those that have titles assigned by custom. The poems of Emily Dickinson are presented as edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

It would have been simpler to gloss no word a student could find in a desk dictionary, on the grounds that rummaging through dictionaries is good moral discipline; but it seemed best not to require the student to exchange text for dictionary as many as thirty times in reading a story, poem, or play. Glosses have been provided, therefore, for whatever seemed likely to get in the way of pleasure and understanding.

The spelling *rime* is used instead of *rhyme* on the theory that *rime* is easier to tell apart from *rhythm*.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

If we have described this manual as a 24-hour teacher's lounge, we are pleased to report how many interesting colleagues have stopped in to chat. We receive a steady stream of letters on *Literature* from instructors throughout North America and abroad. Sometimes they disagree with our comments; more often they add new information or perspective. Frequently they pass on stories about what works or does not work in their classrooms. Much of this information is simply too good not to share. We have, therefore, supplemented our own comments with hundreds of comments from instructors (always properly credited to their authors).

THANKS

Heartfelt thanks to Michael Palma, who contributed many excellent entries on the new selections added to this edition. His deep knowledge of literature and crisp sense of style keeps the manual fresh, informed, and accessible. Ongoing thanks go to Erika Koss of Northeastern University, who contributed a number of entries to the previous edition, to Susan Balée and Neil Aitken, who contributed to the chapter on writing a research paper; and to April Lindner, who served as associate editor for the writing section revisions of an earlier edition.

Ongoing thanks to Robert McPhillips, Cheryl Clements, Lee Gurga, Nan LaBoe, Richard Mezo, Jeff Newberry, Beverly Schneller, Janet Schwarzkopf, Theresa Welford, and William Zander for help with this book.

Many instructors, most of whose names appear in this manual, generously wrote us with their suggestions and teaching experiences. Other instructors are noted in the introductory remarks to the textbook itself. We thank them all for their pragmatic and informed help. We are grateful to Dianne Hall for her formidable effort and good will in managing the design and production of the manual and to Michael Hall for carefully proofreading the book. Finally, we would like to thank Mary Gioia, whose remarkable planning and editorial skills kept this manual in running order despite its erratic drivers.

XJK, DG, and DS





FICTION





STORIES ARRANGED BY TYPE AND ELEMENT

If you prefer to teach a *different* story to illustrate an element of fiction—to discuss style, say, with the aid of “Cathedral” or “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” instead of the examples in the chapter on style—you will find the substitution easy to make. Many choices are at your disposal in Chapter 9, “Stories for Further Reading,” and other stories in the book lend themselves to varied purposes. The following list has a few likely substitutions. If you teach other elements of fiction (e.g., humor, fantasy) or specific genres, you will find some nominations here.

FABLE, PARABLE, AND TALE

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
Death Has an Appointment in Samarra	The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Godfather Death	The Tell-Tale Heart
Independence	
The Fox and the Grapes	
The Camel and His Friends	

PLOT

STORY INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
A & P	Barn Burning
	The Gift of the Magi
	The Lottery
	A Rose for Emily
	A Sound of Thunder
	The Shunammite
	The Story of an Hour
	This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

POINT OF VIEW

First Person Narrator as Central Character

STORY INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
The Tell-Tale Heart	Araby (<i>mature narrator recalling boyhood view</i>)
	Barbie-Q
	Cathedral
	Greasy Lake

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POINT OF VIEW (Cont.)

A Pair of Tickets
 Recitatif
 The Shunammite
 The Yellow Wallpaper

First Person Narrator Not the Protagonist

STORY INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORY
A Rose for Emily	The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Third Person, All-knowing Narrator

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
A Good Man Is Hard to Find	The Gift of the Magi
A Worn Path	A Good Man Is Hard to Find
	The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
	The Storm
	The Things They Carried
	This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
	Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? (<i>par. 1–13</i>)

**Third Person, Limited Omniscience
 (Narrator Seeing into One Major Character)**

SUGGESTED STORIES

Barn Burning
 The Gospel According to Mark
 Miss Brill
 The Story of an Hour

Objective or “Fly-on-the-Wall” Point of View

SUGGESTED STORIES

The Chrysanthemums
 A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

Multiple Points of View

SUGGESTED STORY

A Haunted House

CHARACTER

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER	OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
Bullet in the Brain	Barn Burning (<i>Sarty Snopes: dynamic character, one who develops within the story</i>)
Cathedral	The Chrysanthemums
Recitatif	Everyday Use
Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?	A Good Man Is Hard to Find
	The Things They Carried
	A Worn Path

SETTING

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER

The Gospel According to Mark
 A Pair of Tickets
 The Storm
 To Build a Fire

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES

A & P
 Araby
 The Chrysanthemums
 A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
 A Good Man Is Hard to Find
 Greasy Lake
 A Haunted House
 A Rose for Emily
 Sweat
 The Things They Carried
 This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix,
 Arizona
 The Yellow Wallpaper
 Young Goodman Brown

tone and style

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER

Barn Burning
 A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES

Barbie-Q
 Cathedral
 Girl
 A Good Man Is Hard to Find
 Greasy Lake
 A Haunted House
 The Handsomest Drowned Man
 in the World
 A Rose for Emily
 The Tell-Tale Heart
 The Things They Carried
 Where Are You Going, Where Have
 You Been?
 A Worn Path
 Young Goodman Brown

irony

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER

The Gift of the Magi
 Happy Endings

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES

Death Has an Appointment in Samarra
 Dead Men's Path
 The Gospel According to Mark
 Happy Endings
 The Lottery
 A Rose for Emily
 Saboteur
 The Storm
 The Story of an Hour
 To Build a Fire



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STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER

The Chrysanthemums
The Lottery
The Ones Who Walk Away
from Omelas
The Yellow Wallpaper

SYMBOL

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES

Araby
Cathedral
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
Greasy Lake (*the lake itself*)
A Haunted House
The Handsomest Drowned Man
in the World
A Rose for Emily
Sweat
The Tell-Tale Heart
A Worn Path
Young Goodman Brown



STORIES ARRANGED BY SUBJECT AND THEME

In case you prefer to teach fiction according to its subjects and general themes, we have provided a list of stories that may be taken up together. Some instructors who arrange a course thematically like to *begin* with Chapter 6, *Theme*, and its four stories.

ART, LANGUAGE, AND IMAGINATION

Cathedral
Everyday Use
The Gospel According to Mark
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
Saints
A Sound of Thunder
The Yellow Wallpaper

CHILDHOOD

Araby
Barbie-Q
Girl
Recitatif

COMEDY AND SATIRE

A & P
Happy Endings
Harrison Bergeron
How I Met My Husband
How to Talk to Girls at Parties
Independence
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

COMING OF AGE, INITIATION STORIES

Araby
Barn Burning
Greasy Lake
How I Met My Husband
Recitatif
Saints
The Shunammite

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This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

DEATH

Bullet in the Brain
Death Has an Appointment in Samarra
Dead Men's Path
Godfather Death
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
A Rose for Emily
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
To Build a Fire

DEFIANCE OF FATE

Death Has an Appointment in Samarra
Godfather Death
A Worn Path

DISABILITIES

Cathedral

DIVINE REVELATION

The Gospel According to Mark

EPIPHANIES AND ILLUMINATIONS

Araby
Greasy Lake
A Haunted House
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
The Lawsuit
Miss Brill
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Saints
The Story of an Hour

FACING ONE'S OWN DEATH

A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
To Build a Fire

FAMILIES

Barn Burning
Everyday Use
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Saints
The Shunammite
The Storm
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Worn Path

FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Barn Burning
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
The Storm
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

FRIENDSHIP AND CAMARADERIE

A & P
Araby
Barbie-Q
Cathedral
Greasy Lake
Recitatif
Saints
The Things They Carried
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

GENERATION GAPS

A & P
Araby
Girl
Greasy Lake
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

HOLDING A JOB, WORK

A & P
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
Sweat

HUMANITY AGAINST THE ELEMENTS

To Build a Fire
A Worn Path

ILLUSION AND REALITY

Araby
The Chrysanthemums
Dead Men's Path
The Gospel According to Mark
Greasy Lake
Saints
The Tell-Tale Heart
The Yellow Wallpaper

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A Worn Path
Young Goodman Brown

IMMIGRANTS AND EXILES

Barbie-Q
A Pair of Tickets
Saints

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SOCIETY

A & P
Barn Burning
Dead Men's Path
Harrison Bergeron
Independence
The Lottery
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
A Rose for Emily
Saboteur
Saints
A Worn Path
Young Goodman Brown

INGENIOUS DECEPTIONS

Saints
The Tell-Tale Heart
Young Goodman Brown

LONELINESS

The Chrysanthemums
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
Miss Brill
Saints
The Shunammite

LOVE AND DESIRE

A & P
Araby
The Chrysanthemums
The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
Happy Endings
A Haunted House
How to Talk to Girls at Parties
The Shunammite
The Storm
The Story of an Hour

MACHISMO AND SEXISM

A & P
Greasy Lake

The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World
The Shunammite
Sweat

MAGIC AND THE OCCULT

Death Has an Appointment in Samarra
Godfather Death
A Haunted House
Young Goodman Brown

MARRIAGES (THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY)

Cathedral
The Gift of the Magi
Happy Endings
A Haunted House
The Shunammite
The Storm
The Story of an Hour
Sweat
The Yellow Wallpaper

MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Everyday Use
Girl
A Pair of Tickets
Recitatif
Saints

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Dead Men's Path
Everyday Use
Independence
A Pair of Tickets
Saboteur
The Shunammite
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

MURDER

A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
A Rose for Emily
The Tell-Tale Heart
Sweat

NATURE

The Storm
A Sound of Thunder
To Build a Fire

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PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

Barn Burning
Dead Men's Path

RACE, CLASS, AND CULTURE

Barbie-Q
Barn Burning
Dead Men's Path
Everyday Use
The Gift of the Magi
Independence
A Pair of Tickets
Recitatif
The Shunammite
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Worn Path

SIBLINGS

Everyday Use
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son

VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS

A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Lawsuit
Saboteur
The Shunammite
Sweat
The Tell-Tale Heart
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?
The Yellow Wallpaper

WAR

The Things They Carried

THE WISH TO LEAVE EVERYTHING AND RUN AWAY

The Chrysanthemums
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Saints

WOMEN'S ASPIRATIONS

The Chrysanthemums
The Shunammite
The Yellow Wallpaper

STORIES STUDENTS LIKE MOST

At the end of earlier editions of *Literature*, we included a short student questionnaire. This form solicited each student's opinion about his or her reactions to the book. The editors read and saved each completed questionnaire they received. These candid student responses often help improve the anthology from edition to edition.

These student responses are interesting in their own right, but they also add perspective on what really happens in the classroom. The stories students prefer often differ sharply from those that instructors rate most highly. Instructors can learn a great deal by remembering how younger readers find certain selections both exciting and illuminating that may seem overly familiar to seasoned teachers.

Here are the top stories from previous editions chosen by a large sample of students over the years.

FAVORITE STORIES (*Student Choices in Rank Order*)

1. William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily"
2. Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"
3. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart"
4. T. Coraghessan Boyle, "Greasy Lake"
5. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"
6. Jack London, "To Build a Fire"
7. John Updike, "A & P"
8. Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

FICTION

A story even shorter than the one about the last person in the world and her doorbell appeared in a letter to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* for January 16, 1981. “Unluckily,” writes Hugh R. Williams, “I cannot remember the source.” He offers it as the briefest ghost tale ever discovered:

Before going to bed one night, a man put his wig on the bedpost. In the morning it had turned white.

Suggestion for an assignment in writing a story: Write another supernatural tale that ends with the revelation of something inexplicable. It need not be so brief, but keep it within two paragraphs.

1

READING A STORY

For a second illustration of a great detail in a story, a detail that sounds observed instead of invented (besides Defoe's "two shoes, not mates"), you might cite a classic hunk of hokum: H. Rider Haggard's novel of farfetched adventure, *She* (1887). Describing how the Amahagger tribesmen dance wildly by the light of unusual torches—embalmed corpses of the citizens of ancient Kor, left over in quantity—the narrator, Holly, remarks, "So soon as a mummy was consumed to the ankles, which happened in about twenty minutes, the feet were kicked away, and another put in its place." (Pass down another mummy, this one is guttering!) Notice the exact specification "in about twenty minutes" and the unforgettable discarding of the unburned feet, like a candle stub. Such detail, we think, bespeaks a tall-tale-teller of genius. (For this citation, we thank T. J. Binyon's review of *The Private Diaries of Sir Henry Rider Haggard* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 Aug. 1980.)

When you introduce students to the *tale* as a literary form, you might point out that even in this age of electronic entertainment, a few tales still circulate from mouth to ear. Ask them whether they have heard any good tales lately.

TYPES OF SHORT FICTION

Sufi Legend, DEATH HAS AN APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA, page 6

This classic fable has much in common with the Grimm tale "Godfather Death"—not only the appearance of Death as a character, but also the moral or lesson that Death cannot be defied. Somerset Maugham included this fable in his play *Sheppey* (1933), but it is probably best known as the epigraph to John O'Hara's novel *Appointment in Samarra* (New York: Random, 1934).

Students may be asked to recall other fables they know. To jog their memories, famous expressions we owe to Aesop ("sour grapes," "the lion's share," "dog in the manger," and others) may suggest the fables that gave them rise. At least, the fable of the hare and the tortoise should be familiar to any watcher of old Bugs Bunny cartoons.

Aesop, THE FOX AND THE GRAPES, page 7

Aesop's fables—many of which, like "The Fox and the Grapes," involve animals endowed with human traits of character and consciousness—are still so familiar to many students that they may be tempted to treat them condescendingly as "kids'

16 FICTION

stuff.” His fables are also so compact that they seem very slight. It may help students initially to point out that in classical times the notion of a special literature for children as opposed to other groups did not exist. Aesop told his stories to a mixed audience probably consisting mostly of adults. It might even be interesting to ask a fundamental question such as whether a story is necessarily different if it is directed toward adults or children.

QUESTIONS

1. In fables, the fox is usually clever and frequently successful. Is that the case here? The sly fox, who uses guile and cunning to trick others into giving him what he wants, is a stock character of the fable tradition. In this fable, of course, the fox fails to achieve what he wants to, perhaps because the skills required are physical, not mental. On the other hand, it could be argued that he displays some (no doubt unconscious) cleverness in coming up with an explanation that soothes his vanity and blunts his desire.

2. The original Greek word for the fox’s description of the grapes is *omphakes*, which more precisely means “unripe.” Does the translator’s use of the word “sour” add any further level of meaning to the fable? While “unripe” merely suggests “not yet ready,” “sour grapes” sound bitter and permanently, if not inherently, undesirable (and may even, on one level, be suggestive of the mood in which the phrase is most likely uttered).

3. How well does the closing moral fit the fable? A number of Aesop’s fables carry morals that do not seem directly expressive of what is happening in the text, but the moral of this fable fits quite well indeed, so much so that “sour grapes” has become a stock phrase in English to refer to the disparagement of something that is desirable but unattainable.

Bidpai, THE CAMEL AND HIS FRIENDS, page 9

Bidpai’s Sanskrit fables remain little known in English, but they occupy an important place in Asian literature—from Turkey and Iran to Indonesia and India. Translations and adaptations abound in the East as extensively as Aesop’s fables do in the West.

The *Panchatantra*, or *Five Chapters*, was intended as a sort of moral textbook. The frame-tale presents a learned Brahmin teacher who used animal tales to instruct his students, the three amazingly dimwitted sons of a king. (Remedial education, it appears, is nothing new.) The moral code espoused by the fables is consistently practical rather than idealistic. Shrewdness and skepticism, they suggest, are necessary traits for survival in a world full of subtle dangers. The foolishly trusting camel in the fable reprinted here finds out too late that his “friends” have fatal designs—not bad advice for members of a royal family or anyone else to learn.

Chuang Tzu, INDEPENDENCE, page 11

Chuang Tzu’s parables are famous in Chinese culture, both as works of intrinsic literary merit and as pithy expressions of Taoist philosophy. Parables are important

literary genres in traditional societies. They reflect a cultural aesthetic that appreciates the power of literary artistry while putting it to the use of illustrating moral and religious ideas. Clarity is a key virtue in a parable or moral fable. Its purpose is not merely to entertain but also to instruct.

Chuang Tzu's celebrated parable suggests the uneasy relationship between philosophy and power in ancient China. It was not necessarily a safe gesture to decline the public invitation of a king, and the refusal of employment could be construed as an insult or censure. Chuang understands that the only safe way to turn down a monarch is with wit and charm. He makes his moral point, but with self-deprecating humor.

In his indispensable book *Essentials of Chinese Literary Art* (Belmont: Duxbury, 1979, p. 46), James J. Y. Liu of Stanford University comments on the sly rhetoric of this parable:

Instead of solemnly declaring that worldly power and glory are all in vain, Chuang Tzu makes us see their absurdity by comparing them to a dead tortoise. At the same time, life unburdened with official duties is not idealized, but compared to the tortoise dragging its tail in the mud.

The *Tzu* following Chuang's name is an honorific meaning *master*. The philosopher's historical name was Chuang Chou. The Chinese surname is conventionally put first, so Chuang is the proper term to use for the author.

This parable was a favorite of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, who was fascinated by the Chinese fabular tradition.

Jesus's "Parable of the Prodigal Son" (Luke 15: 11–32) is found in the chapter on "Theme." It may be interesting for students to compare the differing techniques of these two classic parables from different traditions.

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, GODFATHER DEATH, page 13

For all its brevity, "Godfather Death" illustrates typical elements of plot. That is the main reason for including it in this chapter (not to mention its intrinsic merits!). It differs from Updike's contemporary "A & P" in its starker characterizations, its summary method of telling, its terser descriptions of setting, and its element of magic and the supernatural. In its world, God, the Devil, and Death walk the highway. If students can be shown these differences, then probably they will be able to distinguish most tales from most short stories.

"Godfather Death" may be useful, too, in a class discussion of point of view. In the opening pages of Chapter 2, we discuss the ways in which this tale is stronger for having an omniscient narrator. If you go on to deal with symbolism, you may wish to come back to this tale for a few illustrations of wonderful, suggestive properties: the magical herb, Death's underground cave, and its "thousands and thousands" of flickering candles.

This is a grim tale even for Grimm: a young man's attentions to a beautiful princess bring about his own destruction. In a fairy tale it is usually dangerous to defy some arbitrary law; and in doing so here the doctor breaks a binding contract. From the opening, we know the contract will be an evil one—by the father's initial foolishness in spurning God. Besides, the doctor is a thirteenth child—an unlucky one.

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Possible visual aids are reproductions of the “Dance of Death” woodcuts by Hans Holbein the younger. Have any students seen Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal*, and can they recall how Death was personified?

Anne Sexton has a sophisticated retelling of “Godfather Death,” in which the doctor’s guttering candle is “no bigger than an eyelash,” in her *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton, 1971), a collection of poems based on Grimm. “Godfather Death” is seldom included in modern selections of fairy tales for children. Bruno Bettelheim has nothing specific to say about “Godfather Death” but has much of interest to say about fairy tales in his *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Knopf, 1976). Though Bettelheim’s study is addressed primarily to adults “with children in their care,” any college student fascinated by fairy tales would find it stimulating.

PLOT

THE SHORT STORY

John Updike, A & P, page 18

Many popular novels and short stories feature a protagonist’s defiance of his or her society, often prompted by an epiphany. In J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* and James Joyce’s “Araby”—as well as John Updike’s “A & P”—this character is a teenager in quest of adulthood.

John Updike was hired by the *New Yorker* as a staff writer in the mid-1950s. First published in the 22 July 1961 issue of the *New Yorker*, “A & P” appeared the next year in Updike’s short story collection *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*. A prominent literary critic at the time, Arthur Mizener, reviewed the collection for the *New York Times Book Review*, praising Updike for “his natural talent [that] is so great that for some time it has been a positive handicap to him.” More than fifty years later, “A & P” continues its claim as one of the most popular stories of the twentieth century, and Updike’s most anthologized.

“A & P” is a good story to use in the classroom to discuss the typical elements of plot. The **setting** is clear from Updike’s opening paragraph (“I’m in the third check-out slot . . . with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers”). Relatively long for so brief a story, the **exposition** takes up most of the story’s first half. Portraying Queenie and the other girls in loving detail, this exposition helps make Sammy’s later gesture of heroism understandable. It establishes, also, that Sammy feels at odds with his job, and so foreshadows his heroism. Dramatic **conflict** arrives with the appearance of Lengel, the manager, and his confrontation with the girls. When Lengel catches Sammy smiling, we can guess the clerk is in for trouble. **Crisis** and **climax** are practically one, but if you care to distinguish them, the crisis may be found in paragraph 20: “I thought and said ‘No’ but it wasn’t about that I was thinking,” in which Sammy hovers on the brink of his decision. The **climax** is his announcement “I quit”; the **conclusion** is his facing a bleaker future. The last sentence implies not only that Sammy will have trouble getting another job, but that if he continues to go through life as an uncompromising man of principle, then life from now on is going to be rough.

In “A & P” and the fairy tale “Godfather Death,” the plots are oddly similar. In both, a young man smitten with a young woman’s beauty makes a sacrifice in order to defend her from his grim overlord. (It is far worse, of course, to have Death for an

overlord than Lengel.) If this resemblance doesn't seem too abstract, it may be worth pursuing briefly. The stories, to be sure, are more different than similar, but one can show how Updike is relatively abundant in his descriptions of characters and setting and goes more deeply into the central character's motivation—as short-story authors usually do, unlike most writers of tales.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “A & P.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Notice how artfully Updike arranges details to set the story in a perfectly ordinary supermarket. What details stand out for you as particularly true to life? What does this close attention to detail contribute to the story? The details of this perfectly ordinary supermarket are clear from the beginning, and there are several humorous descriptions, such as when the three girls walk “up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle” (par. 5). As with most grocery stores, the placement of certain items on a particular aisle seems misplaced or illogical. Later in that same paragraph, Sammy aptly describes the way people mutter in a grocery store, completely engrossed with their lists, when he speculates, “I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering ‘Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce’” (par. 5).

The store is far away from any beach or swimming pool (five miles away according to paragraph 10), so the girls' bathing suits draw a great deal of notice from Sammy and the other customers. His detailed analysis of what they're wearing and their body size, as well as his lustful comparisons as he tries to decide which of the three is the prettiest, is certainly true to real life. All these vivid descriptions help the reader not only picture the grocery store, but also demonstrate Sammy's personality and worldview.

2. How fully does Updike draw the character of Sammy? What traits (admirable or otherwise) does Sammy show? Is he any less a hero for wanting the girls to notice his heroism? To what extent is he more thoroughly and fully portrayed than the doctor in “Godfather Death”? Sammy isn't sophisticated, but he is sometimes witty and always observant. He comes from a family of proletarian beer drinkers and thinks martinis are garnished with mint. His feelings for the girls begin with lustful admiration for their beauty and unconventional behavior, but this soon turns to pity, since he believes the girls did not intend to foster such a judgmental response from strangers. Then he feels elated when they decide to check out at his register, which turns to anger at his manager for the unjust humiliation they undergo. That he wants to be admired for his heroism only makes his character more realistic and human. His motives for doing so are deeper than just wanting the girls' attention. Sammy considers that his boss knows his parents, and realizes his act may warrant their disapproval.

Unlike the doctor in “Godfather Death,” the reader experiences the pleasure of hearing Sammy's own thoughts consistently throughout “A & P.” We sympathize with Sammy, in part, because we are offered so many insights into his personality and humanity. We experience his passage from boyhood to manhood, and we share

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his painful realization in the final paragraph. In “Godfather Death,” we are only given two moments of insight into the doctor’s thoughts: once when he defies Death to save the King, and again when he rebels to save the King’s daughter. Although we sympathize when he “fell into the hands of Death,” it is so predictable that we wonder why he didn’t see it coming. Sammy’s final realization is raw and surprising. We see Sammy’s strengths and weaknesses from a psychological perspective that is completely absent from “Godfather Death,” as it is from most fairy tales, fables, and legends.

3. What part of the story seems to be the exposition? Of what value to the story is the carefully detailed portrait of Queenie, the leader of the three girls? The exposition takes up most of the story’s first half, through paragraph 10. The exposition’s carefully detailed portrait of Queenie is essential to the story and to Sammy’s final decision to defy his boss. She moves gracefully with a commanding presence. Sammy notices every part of her body and praises it with great detail. Sammy is perhaps most intrigued by the fact that she isn’t wearing her bathing suit’s shoulder straps. Stokesie, Sammy’s married co-worker, almost faints. If she were not such an enthralling Queen, how would she effect such a response in a stranger with whom she barely speaks? While Sammy’s language is sometimes pedestrian—“Really, I thought that was so cute” (par. 11)—he is capable of fresh and accurate insights, as when he describes the way Queenie walks on her bare feet, his comparison of the “clean bare plane” of her upper chest to “a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light” (par. 3).

As the story develops, do you detect any change in Sammy’s feelings toward the girls? This is a crucial aspect of the story that you may need to point out to your students. During the first half of the story, Sammy displays conventional male reactions to girls in two-piece bathing suits, and he comments that he can “never know for sure how girls’ minds work” and even wonders if they have a mind or if there’s just “a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar” (par. 2). He acts as a 19-year-old awestruck boy. He only notices their tan lines, bathing suits, and body parts. He gives them nicknames based on their body shapes without any thought to what their real names might be.

However, toward the end of the story, Sammy moves from sexual attraction to human sympathy for the girls. For example, he changes from focusing on Queenie’s “good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can” to noticing when Lengel makes her blush from embarrassment in his check-out line. When Sammy first hears Queenie speak, “all of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room” and he imagines her family and his enjoying the herring snacks that she was at his store to purchase (par. 13). No doubt his hormones are raging, especially when Queenie “lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top” and hands it to him (par. 11). However, after the girls exit the store, Sammy thinks about Lengel’s confrontation and considers his own options: “remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab” (par. 30); and he walks out of the store in defiance.

4. Where in “A & P” does the dramatic conflict become apparent? What moment in the story brings the crisis? What is the climax of the story? The dramatic conflict arrives with the appearance of Lengel, the manager, and his confrontation with the girls. The crisis and climax are practically one—but to be more exact, one might say the crisis is found in paragraph 20: “I thought and said ‘No’ but