

Hi Michelle,

As we discussed this past Friday, I hope to provide a sense for the relevance of the story “Bettering Myself” by Ottessa Moshfegh to my ENC 1102 F2F reading list (I do not use this story for the online version of the course). Moshfegh was awarded the 2013 Plimpton Prize for Fiction, the 2016 Pen/Hemingway Award, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and a finalist for the National Critics Circle Award. I only bring up these credentials to illustrate that she has been a known entity in the world of modern short fiction.

In the first week of ENC 1102 I convey to my students that we will read a variety of stories in our Fiction Unit – many classics, some modern; some that they might dislike, and others that might challenge, discomfort, or even disturb. And to consider that we read literature to examine the nature of language, the shapes of narrative, to learn about people through characters and – perhaps most importantly – to learn about ourselves. I have great respect for my students as a whole and, in particular, their proven abilities to rise to the occasion of learning from artifacts beyond their ken, beyond the scope of their own experience.

By the time the students come to “Bettering Myself” they have already encountered the exquisite restraint of Hemingway, the controlled verbosity of Carver, and the melancholy strangeness of both Kafka and Marquez.

To prepare the students for this story, I warn that it is one that can pose real challenges: there is strong language, alcohol and drug use, scenes of exaggerated dysfunction, and the first page will likely be the most shocking for its willful bluntness. I also tell them that fiction can reward a persevering and patient reader, who makes it past that first page, resulting in a neurological ‘productive struggle’ - that crucial dopamine surge that follows overcoming academic or social hurdles. I get a lot of blank stares and cacophonous crickets in that moment. But we return to this idea in the subsequent classes.

A summary, If I may: The narrator of “Bettering Myself” is Ms. Mooney – morally flawed, ruthlessly candid, all manner of caution cast to the winds – a teacher in an East Village Catholic High School serving mostly Ukrainian immigrants, a general purpose substance abuser, obviously depressed, and even more dislocated in her life circumstances and her ability to cope with them. She has a college age boyfriend and an ex-husband who volunteers to pay her if she will just stop calling him when she’s drunk (she ultimately takes him up on the offer when it proves acceptably substantial). Not a winning formula.

The narrative is a kind of Picasso-esque portrait that asks the reader if there is any story value to be found in the unvarnished descent of a character to even further disrepair and disrepute

than the opening sequences suggest. Yet somehow the narrative finds humor (albeit dark) in this sticky seam.

Will the story ultimately deliver on the promise of its title? Will Ms. Mooney take the opportunity to *better herself* or has she become sufficiently accustomed to her situation that she cannot conceive any alteration in its static dysfunction? It turns out she does try, though not remotely in the ways we might suggest or condone. Here is a character entirely aware of her own degradation. She is meant to be repulsive. But if she also garners some small measure of sympathy from the reader, how does the story achieve this? These are some of the ideas and questions that guide our discussion. In a technical analysis, students focus on the wayward, unpredictable first-person voice and compare it to the narrator of Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral" (male) who has proven himself – over the course of the story – to be biased against blind people, bigoted, cravenly mean to his wife, yet manages to (begrudgingly) win a reader's sympathy at the very end of the tale. How does an unlikable male narrator compare to an unlikable female narrator? The fellow from "Breaking Bad" comes up a lot when we have this discussion.

Despite the challenging nature of "Bettering Myself" (or, one could argue, because of...), class discussions around the story have always been spirited, collegial and productive, as was this semester's edition. We discussed the story on Tuesday Feb 3rd using the following in-class activities:

First, we created an idea map on the board. As a free-association activity to unearth important gut reactions, I asked the group to throw out words and phrases that came to mind when thinking about this story. Our list featured:

Crazy, Real, Vulgar, Drama, Sad, "Putting others down to make her feel better about herself", TMI, Dysfunctional, "Bad Teacher", Depressed, Icky, "Why?Why?"

We took a moment to consider the words on the board. I asked them if it was possible that we encounter these things in some form or fashion out there in the world beyond the page.

These next three activities were performed in small groups:

- 1) Draw or describe the shape of the story (is it like Hemingway's Iceberg? Does it fall off the side of a cliff? Is it a blobby paramecium? A spiral? Nesting Dolls)?
- 2) Chart the graph of the story – as something in relation to something else: what do you want the X axis to chart? The Y axis? Are you going to go super nerd and bust out a Z axis? Why not!
- 3) How does this story break the rules? Is it, in fact, a story at all?

After 15 minutes each group reported their findings (and drew their shapes and graphs on the board) and the resulting discussion was constructive in demystifying some of the “ickiness” of the initial reading, focusing on the technical choices in characterization and exterior action, and making the analysis a communal and less daunting effort. In some ways, literature is the safest place to encounter something uncomfortable and distasteful for the very first time.

There are no reading quizzes in my F2F offering of ENC 1102. So, there is no real penalty for not completing a reading. I assign what I call “Reading Notes” which contribute to a portion of the overall Grade. These are 150-300 word entries on each story, and students can either choose from a list of questions provided or can “freestyle” their response (or some combination). The goal of the reading notes is to *switch on* their thinking as opposed to shut down. I tell my students that these notes are about process rather than product, and a space for them to converse with the material (and thereby themselves) – especially when it bothers them, even if that makes it a 150 word rant.

Well, I appear to have made a long story interminable. I hope I have addressed, in some part, why I assign it—for me, shock value alone has no place in a curriculum (or in an effective story). There has to be some notable narrative engineering that surpasses it. In this case, its humanizing (or attempt to humanize) an unlikable female narrator.

If you are still with me, here among the kudzu at the end of the world, and your knuckle hairs are not grey, I have door prizes, and fruit cobbler, and much gratitude!

I am happy to discuss further and provide more information if anyone requires it. My classroom is also open for all who would like to visit.

Many thanks and all best,

Vini