

“A Boy Named Sue”

The Basics

Time Required

1 class period

Subject Areas

11th Grade American Literature
Contemporary America, 1968-present

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

Author

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The Lesson

Introduction

The idea is to get the creative juices flowing, to appreciate and recognize the common characteristics of fictional pieces (and perhaps reinforce) and to introduce/solidify the idea that stories can come from so many different sources and can be translated into many different sources. I plan on presenting this unit at the end of the year—usually as a culminating project that includes the students writing their own short stories. Therefore, other aspects could be reinforced with the song as well such as pointing out sound devices and other pieces of figurative language.

I also want to point out that while the use of imagination is fun, it should also be considered a legitimate art form. Creating “out of the box” is many times easier said than done, but is something anyone with their own thoughts can do at some level.

Guiding Questions

How can perspective influence the telling of a story?
How can perspective influence the understanding of a story?

Learning Objectives

- To compose a creative piece of fiction
- To reflect through discussion on what drives the imagination
- To identify narrative devices and figurative language

Preparation Instructions

Song used in this lesson:
“A Boy Named Sue” (lyrics by Shel Silverstein)

Lesson Activities

- 1) Instruct students to take out a sheet of paper. Pose the following scenario on the board and give students approximately 5-7 minutes to compose: A new kid named Robert, who is attractive and well-groomed, arrives at school. Almost immediately, kids start picking on Robert. In story form, describe how and why the other kids begin picking on Robert and what Robert does in response.
- 2) For the next segment of the activity, pose the same scenario; however, notify students that this time, Robert is a very pretty and well-groomed girl. (5-7 minutes)

**Activities 1 and 2 can be adjusted so that each half of the class writes Robert as a particular gender.

- 3) Briefly share stories. Note any differences to yourself that arise regarding stereotyping. Be ready to broach the subject and ask questions such as: Why did you appropriate certain characteristics to each name? Did anyone automatically feel that they needed to approach the story differently when Robert was a girl? Explain. *Option: You can create a two-columned chart that lists "Robert" at the top of each column. In each column, write the characteristics appropriated for the Robert in each story, according to gender. This is an easy way to take a look at how characteristic appropriation breaks down without one knowing it.

Emphasize that small details about our world can have a major impact on how we react to our world. These reactions also strongly affect how we tell stories to others. Then, have students focus on the idea of the detail to expound on their stories.

- 4) Instruct students: Continue your story. Your character probably became aggravated in some way about being teased. Now, have your character do something that is slightly uncharacteristic of him/her, but attempt to maintain some level of believability. (5-7 minutes)
- 5) Share some student creations and ask questions, any of the following or ones that you devise/create before or during sharing: What happened in your story? Where did you take your character? Once you recognized that you were stereotyping (if you did), did that affect your follow-up story? Do you feel that you have made your story believable? Did you choose to make your character funny? Tragic? Explain your decisions. What did you like about this activity? Dislike? Do you feel that other people have experienced portions of what your "Robert" has experienced and would benefit from hearing your story? (10-12 minutes)
- 6) Ask as a segue: In what forms can one tell a story? *Answer: writing; oral tradition; singing; performance art; etc.*
- 7) Introduce the Shel Silverstein story and Johnny Cash recording of "A Boy Named Sue." Explain that this story is in song form and may resemble much of what you have written about your "Robert." It is quite imaginative and could be based on portions of real events. Note that no clear information relays that Shel Silverstein was a violent or impulsive individual. He did not quite fit in when growing up, however, which may have provided some impetus for the idea of being teased somewhat. Of course, everybody experiences that at some point, which is why, while a fictional piece, this song is still a valuable one. Explain that this song is an example of a narrative song.

Pass out lyrics and play recording. You can find a recording at iTunes or on other CD's easily orderable through Amazon.com. (10 minutes)

- 8) Questions related to the song text (choose those that best fit your goals and present in order deemed necessary):
 - a. Identify the protagonist of the song.
 - b. Identify the antagonist(s) of the song.

- c. Silverstein/Cash uses metaphors to describe his father. a) What is one metaphor that he uses? b) Does the metaphor seem effective? Explain.
- d. What does the dialogue reveal about the characters? What might be the reason this dialogue is used?
- e. Identify the point at which there is a change in tone.
- f. Trace the plot line for the narrative.
- g. What parts of the text indicate that the narrative could be fictional? (varied time length possibly 10 minutes)

Assessment

Consider assigning step #8 as a written assessment.

Resources

Lyrics

“A Boy Named Sue” available at

http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/shel_silverstein/poems/14827