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1st Year – 2nd Semester

Short Story

Lecture 1

“Muddy Road”

First of all, I would like to welcome all of you in the second semester of your first academic year. Before we start, I would like to express my deepest sorrow for the exceptional circumstances humanity is going through. I really appreciate the extra effort you will have to exert due to the precautionary lockdown that denied you the opportunity to attend in person and enrich the content of the course with your comments and questions. However, I hope that we will get the chance to have our lectures the regular way in two weeks from today.

Course Syllabus

In this course, we are going to explore a number of short stories by different writers. The stories will be selected from different periods so that you get the chance to study works of art from that tackle different themes and explore different narrative techniques. Hence, this course will not depend on one source for the stories. However, you need to get the book titled *The Short Story and the Reader: Discovering Narrative Techniques*, edited by Thomas S. Kane and Leonard J. Peters. You can

buy it from the bookstore of the university for only 325 SYP. Any stories from outside the book will be provided to you some time before we will discuss them together so that you can read them in advance.

What you are required to do before the lectures

It is highly recommended that you read the stories in advance so that you have your own initial response to the stories, form your own reading and analysis, and prepare your own questions for in-class discussion, which I hope we will soon be able to have. You are also required to read about the author of the short story and find out any interesting details about their lives or any details that may help you have a better understanding of the work under study. For this purpose, at the end of each lecture, we will give you the title of the story to be discussed next.

Origins of the short story

As a genre, the modern short story can go back in time to the 19th century. However, there were short stories before the 19th century, and they can go back to ancestors like fables. So, the fable is very old in time, and it existed earlier than the novel and the short story and other genres of prose fiction. There were some genres like fables, ballads which are usually written in verse, and the tradition of oral story telling which is very old, and the short story had its roots or origins back in time in this tradition of storytelling, in fables, and in ballads.

Periodicals

The modern short story emerged in the 19th century in the United States, England, and other parts of Europe, and it emerged in that time

because of the appearance of what we call periodicals. A periodical is a publication that appears at specific schedules and times, which can be weekly, monthly, quarterly (every three months), etc. They are like magazines and newspapers that we have nowadays. These periodicals helped in the appearance and prosperity of the short story because many writers found them suitable for publishing their short stories.

Elements of a sort story

Traditionally a short story comprises a setting, characters, plot, theme, and symbols. Of course, we have experimental writers who violate the strict conventions, but it is most likely to find these elements in most of the stories you read.

Starting with the setting, one needs to that it is has two sides, time and space. The place where the action takes place combined with the time covered in the story make its setting. There are many types of time, which we will explore together in the stories discussed this semester. When it comes to characters, one needs to keep in mind that this concept is not limited to people. Sometimes, animals, places, or elements of nature, to mention but a few, could be characters. The plot refers to the way the events of the story are arranged, and it also has many types, some of which we will study throughout this semester, and I highly advise you to read about the different plot types used in fiction. The theme refers to the main idea, meaning, or message of the story. When it comes to symbols, not all short stories have complex symbols that need to be deciphered. However, many characters and setting elements have some representation that could be read as symbolism.

What is the difference between a novel and a short story?

Based on the elements of the short story, we can highlight some basic differences between a novel and a short story. There are many things in common between the novel and the short story. It is reasonable to start highlighting the difference between these two genres by shedding light on the common features between the two. Both the novel and the short story are creative narrative writings, and they share the same basic elements mentioned above. However, the main difference is the length of the piece of writing as the novel is significantly longer than a short story, and from this difference most of the other differences extend. In terms of setting, the short story usually has a more confined setting. The time span of the events of the short story is usually shorter than that of a novel. The same thing applies to the space presented in the short story. The novel usually has more freedom with space than a short story. The novel has the liberty of exploring more than one character in depth, while a short story would focus on one or two characters. In addition, the short story would be limited to one plot line, whereas a novel would have many sub-plots in addition to the main plot, and the same applied to the theme. A novel could explore more than one theme in comparison to the short story that is normally limited to one theme.

Having mentioned the main differences between the two genres, one needs to keep in mind that literature is a creative production, which means no rules are strictly applied, especially in postmodernism.

Now, let us start with a short story titled **“Muddy Road”** or **“Zen Parable”**.

The two titles of the story give the reader some insight into its content even before indulging into its details. The first title “Muddy Road” alerts the reader of a possible element of journey, whether physical or psychological. The other title “Zen Parable” betrays both the origin and type of the story. The word “Zen” refers to a branch of Buddhism that originated in China, and the word “Parable” refers to a type of short stories told to teach a moral or a spiritual lesson. Therefore, one would expect a story that includes a journey and teaches a moral lesson. This tells us that we, as readers, need to start asking questions right from the beginning of the reading experience, and this applied to all literary genres, not only the short story.

“Muddy Road”

Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling.

Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

“Come on, girl,” said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself.

“We monks don’t go near females,” he told Tanzan, “especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?”

“I left the girl there,” said Tanzan. “Are you still carrying her?”

Now let us have a general overview of the story. We have three characters here: Tanzan, Ekido, and the girl. Tanzan and Ekido are monks, and this implies that they are not supposed to get too close to women. The third character, who is the girl, did not speak at all. You should remember

that not all characters are explored in the same depth. You do not always have details about all characters. In our story, we know information about Tanzan and Ekido that they are monks, but we do not hear anything from the girl. We just read her description and know that she was wearing a silk kimono and a sash. From her dress, we can guess that she might be rich or attractive; however, we cannot be sure. We are just speculating based on the details we are given. If we think about the impression that she is attractive, we can presume that she might be tempting for the monks. So, she might be put in their way in order to add the element of temptation: an attractive girl in front of two men who are not allowed to be near women because they are monks. We need to pay attention to the fact that in the beginning, it is not the monks who describe the girl for us. We read about her through the words of the narrator. The narrator wants us to know that she is a lovely girl, so we have here the element of temptation.

Another idea we might think about is the place where the events happened. We might think they are in Japan. This could be justified with the fact that she is wearing a kimono and that Zen was extended to some parts of east Japan. If we want to be more specific about the place, we have in the story that the monks were travelling down a muddy road. A road usually implies an adventure, something unknown, journey, exploration, and metaphorically, we can say it implies self-exploration as the road of life. This is what we call symbolism. Moreover, the road is muddy, so why is it muddy? Literally, the road is muddy because of the rain, but we also need to think about it metaphorically. It might imply that there is a difficult situation in the story. This difficult situation could be the temptation that the girl represents to the monks.

One of the questions one might ask is why the girl is alone. However, the story does not give us enough details to answer this question, which means that not all the questions we raise will have answers. What is important is that we should not impose answers that are not evidence-based. Anyhow, we have to ask all the questions in order to come up with a good analysis.

Another question we could ask is why Tanzan carried the girl. Did he just want to help someone having a difficult time? Or, did he have ulterior motives? There is no evidence in the story that he had alternative motives; therefore, we have to stick to what the action in the story showed us. He seems to be just helping a girl who was in trouble.

Let us read and analyse the story.

“Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling.”

With these two sentences, the narrator is establishing the setting of the story. We are immediately introduced to two characters that were travelling together down a muddy road. We also know that heavy rain was falling. We have the weather, the road, and the journey. All this information was introduced in two sentences.

“Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.”

Now the third character—the silent girl—is introduced, in addition to the situation or conflict. We have intersection, and this lovely girl with the silk kimono and sash is finding difficulty in crossing the muddy road. Maybe this girl is from the upper class and she is not used to crossing muddy intersections on foot, and she is worried that her clothes might get

dirty. However, this could take us back again to the question of why she is alone.

“‘Come on, girl,’ said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.”

Notice that the narrator said “at once”. This means suddenly or immediately, so this suggests that Tanzan did not think about it. We call the girl in this situation “a damsel in distress” and usually in stories, this expression refers to the female who is in trouble, and then a hero comes and saves the day. It is something very traditional in stories; a lady waiting for the hero to help her. Here, the person acted at once, so he did not overthink before taking action. That is why we might exclude the idea that he could have had other motives. If he had had motives towards the girl, he would have given the situation more thinking before acting. However, here he just acted without thinking, so we might exclude the ulterior motive.

“‘Come on, girl,’ said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.”

We feel that he immediately acted without even asking for her permission. After carrying her over the mud, we have a full-stop, and the paragraph ends. Then we have a new paragraph.

“Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple.”

Ekido did not speak, and usually when someone is not speaking, we presume that they are thinking! Compare this to Tanzan. Tanzan did not think, but he immediately spoke with the girl “Come on, girl” However, Ekido was thinking about this all the way.

“Then he could no longer restrain himself.”

No longer: This means that he had been restraining himself for a long time, but now he could no longer do it. This example shows us, how simple words can give us a lot of insight into the meaning.

“‘We monks don’t go near females,’ he told Tanzan.”

He is speaking as if he wants to be relieved of a burden he had been carrying for long.

“‘especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous.’”

Now we know that from Ekido’s point of view, the girl is lovely and young, which means, according to him, that she is dangerous for a monk because of the element of temptation.

“‘Why did you do that?’”

He could not stop thinking about what his friend had done.

“‘I left the girl there,’ said Tanzan. ‘Are you still carrying her?’”

Are you still carrying her *in your mind*? This is the implication of Tanzan’s question to Ekido.

The Conflict or Dilemma

As monks, as Ekido made it clear, they were forbidden to be near girls, but if we think about it, being religious is supposedly about helping others. Most religions say that we must help humanity or at least make a better life for people. It is mainly about the idea of helping people. In our story, we have two views: you are not supposed to go near girls, but you are supposed to help people in general. Therefore, the dilemma is that there are two rules that complicate the situation. One rule says that a monk should be kind and help everyone, and another rule says that a monk should not come near girls. Here, the girl is facing a difficult situation, so Tanzan came close to

help her. However, maybe he would not have done a similar thing if the girl had not been in a difficult situation. This tells us something about the way he understands the code and rules. Both monks follow the same rule, but they interpreted them differently. One of them thought that the girl needed help and there is no harm in that. The other one could not go beyond the literal rule.

The Moral Lesson

As the story is a parable, it is legitimate to think of a moral lesson behind it. One of the lessons one could draw from the story is that thoughts can be more dangerous than actions themselves.

The Plot & Time

The plot is the way that events develop. In this story, the plot is linear where the action goes from the two monks walking to the rising action and climax when Tanzan carried the girl and Ekido disapproved of it silently. Then it moves to the falling action and resolution where Ekido speaks out and Tanzan explains his point of view. As for the time in the story, it could be described as a straightforward continuous time where the time starts with the beginning of the story and continues until the end of it with no disruption or gaps.

The Glossary

At the end of the book, on page 507, you have a glossary that offers you definitions of the literary terms as used in the book. If you read the

definition of a plot here, for example, it is very different from what you see in a normal dictionary. The dictionary gives you the general meaning, but this glossary is for literary terms and their definitions.

For our next lecture, please read “The Battler” by Ernest Hemingway.

Stay Safe!

Stay Home!