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ABSTRACT

In an historical review that begins this speech, the short story characterization of a teacher is shown to have remained fairly consistent from Washington Irving to Mark Twain to writers of the 1960s and '70s: teachers are forced into the occupation from poverty, or lack of employment opportunities, or perhaps from personal limitations; are very low on the social totem pole; and are pedantic and ineffective in communication with their students. This is so, it is argued, because of the American cultural preference for muscle over mind, instinct over brain. Typical American heroes through history have been Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, John Wayne, and Joe Namath--not the schoolteacher type. Also described are quasi-Dickensian tag names assigned to teachers in stories (e.g., Miss Lizzie, Miss Oates, Miss Sweet, Weasel Wilson) that immediately characterize the teachers in the stories and indicate teacher stereotypes. In addition, this speech includes an analysis of one short story, "How Educational Progress Came to Greenwood County." The speech's conclusions stress that through teacher portraits in short stories, teachers have an opportunity to see themselves as others see them and change, if they can. (JA)

THE TEACHER-IMAGE IN THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

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by

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by

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"Should you really open your eyes and see, you would behold your image in all images." -- Gibran

Friends, Colleagues, Brothers and Sisters of AESA, and other Members of this Captive Audience:

A Personal View With a Few Digressions

Sometime in the year 1945, as a fifteen-year high school sophomore, I made the decision to become a teacher. And from that moment on, the image of the teacher and the image of Al Nissman became very important to me.

I recall that as a college freshman in 1948 my enthusiasm for teaching was high. And my high was heightened when a female cousin of mine, a physical education teacher herself, said to me, "Any man who is too damned lazy to work becomes a teacher." From that moment on, the teacher-image became even more important to me, and I resolved to be the kind of teacher of whom this accusation could never be made. The image of the teacher became, in effect, my quest for the Holy Grail, my Holy Grail. And now to mix metaphor and religious ideologies, may I quote Rabbi Hillel, the famous Jewish scholar and sage, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" This is a significant question as we concern ourselves with our image, personal and professional. But Hillel continued, "But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" We can readily discern the import here; the image which we develop is the pillar or the yoke of our profession. We are not alone; we are not islands; we are members of a profession -- perhaps not the oldest or the most lucrative -- but certainly the most important.

Therefore, there is an imperative which bids us to ponder. What do short story writers say about who you are and what you are? What do they say about your colleagues and your profession? How do they see you as a human being? How do they see you as a teacher, as a member of society? Is the teacher-image good or bad? What can you personally do to make the teacher-image better? Does Ichabod still live? Will he live forever? Because of you? Or inspite of you? Is the teacher-image a lie? Twain once quipped, "A lie, well told, is immortal."

The sad story is told of the old-maid school teacher who bent over a bit too far. One child said, "Teacher, I saw your ankles." Immediately, the teacher said, "You are suspended for one week!" A second child said, "Teacher, I saw your garters." The teacher, with even greater immediacy, replied, "You are suspended for one month!" A third child rose, gathered his books and coat and began to depart. "And where are you going?" asked the teacher. The child, in all candor, responded, "After what I saw, I'm leaving school forever." The image conjured leaves much to be desired and the joke, if that's what it is, has many implications -- all negative.

I became a teacher in February 1952. Thus it is that I have completed more than twenty-one years of service as a teacher. And I am as proud of being a teacher today as I was 21 years ago. Indeed, I do not expect my pride to ever diminish although there is much about teachers, teaching, and education in general that saddens me -- hypocrisy; sham; anti-intellectualism; malpractice; and baseless criticism sans viable alternatives; and of course, the teacher-image. But like Dr. Max Rafferty, for whom I have much respect and with whom I disagree about 50% of the time, "I am proud to be a teacher....The schools of America are the hope

of America." In short, to paraphrase the gifted poet, Robert Frost, I have a lover's quarrel with education. If I did not love it, I would not care; I would not give a tinker's damn. Ah, but that love and that quarrel have made all the difference!

Thus it is that I come to you this Friday afternoon in Denver to discuss the teacher-image. I come not to bury the teacher-image nor to praise it. Rather, I come to disinter it, to dismember it, to lay open its anatomy for analysis. This is the function of research; is it not?

In my research on the teacher-image in the short story, I have come to the realization that baseball, law, medicine, and sex are the stuff of which too many short stories are written. By contrast, and it is a puny contrast, indeed, the output of the short story concerning teachers is indeed paltry. Someone has said that the sure-fire ingredients of the short story are religion, sex, mystery, and royalty. Here is a summation of such a short story: "My God, the queen is pregnant! Who done it!"

A Historical View - Snippets of Fiction, Sociology, and History

Allow me now, good people, to take you on a brief trip through time to see how poorly the teacher-image has fared in the minds of men.

The venerable Benjamin Franklin, in drafting his plans for his academy in Philadelphia, wrote that one of the purposes of the Academy, later to become the University of Pennsylvania, would be to train some of the poorer sort for teaching. The poorer sort!

Or this image. "Built like a scarecrow, a gangling pin-headed, flat-topped oaf. But what could anyone expect? He was just a teacher."

That was Washington Irving's description of the superstitious, simple, dimwitted Ichabod Crane, an image that will not die!

But you can say, "Nissman, get off it." That was back in the eighteenth century." All right, I counter, let's try Mark Twain for size as he describes Old Dobbins. "A ridiculous figure, his bald head covered with an ill-fitting wig...a man who aspired to be a doctor but who had been forced by poverty to be nothing more than a schoolmaster."

You can say, "Yes, Nissman, this was almost a hundred years ago. But this is 1973." All right, let us see some of the views from 1929 to the present.

In 1929 when the Lynds did their study on Middletown, USA, it was clear that the people had little regard for teachers and books but held athletics in esteem. The jockstrap syndrome, if I may coin a phrase, still holds sway. Or take Willard Waller, who, in 1932, wrote, "School teachers like negroes and women, can never quite enter the white man's world and they must remain partial men, except in the society of others, who, like themselves, are outcast. School teacher prejudice is as difficult a thing to combat as negro prejudice." So what else is new!

Or in Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel of the 1930's. "Their teacher was a gaunt, red-faced spinster, with fierce, glaring eyes."

In 1945, in his book, Teacher In America, Jacques Barzun wrote: "Always and everywhere, 'he is a schoolteacher' has meant 'He is an underpaid pitiable drudge.' Even a politician stands higher, because power in the street seems less of a mockery than power in the classroom."

You see, throughout our pragmatic he-man culture, Paul Bunyan,

Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, John Wayne, Joe Namath, and Tarzan, although all different, represent the idea of the virile, successful man in our society. This is as true in 1973 as it was in 1773. There has been a cultural preference of muscle over mind, instinct over brain, impulsiveness over reflectiveness. (Parenthetically, if you don't believe me, look at the 36 Or 37 men who have been presidents of the United States. With the exceptions of Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, and Jack Kennedy, almost all the men fit into the Davy Crockett-Tarzan mold. But, perhaps, this is a political bias. Now, back to the teacher-image.)

Lindley Stiles in 1957, depicted an interesting hierarchy of a small New England town of contemporary times:

> There was no great distance economically between the well-to-do and others, but social distances were marked. At the top were the few college professors and a few business people. Next were the plumbers, clerks, and librarians. Next were the school teachers. At the bottom were the Negroes.

Let us look now at 1964. A man who is as respectful of teachers and education as Harry Golden wrote something that, although it is historically true, helps to propagate the unflattering teacher-image because there is an under-current of disparagement. "The immigrant parents learned quickly that the City of New York maintained a free city college where a boy could study to become a doctor or a lawyer. At a 'normal school' a daughter could become a teacher."

In 1971, Theodore Barnstein wrote, A Word With You, Miss Thistlebottom. The teacher-image with its pedantic connotations lives on in Bernstein's title. "You remember Miss Thistlebottom. She was the eighth-grade teacher whose rules were supposed to make our speech and writing models of clarity."

Also in 1971, the inimitable Max Rafferty said during an interview: "Teachers and college professors are about as popular as a skunk at a picnic." (Parenthetically, when Rafferty was offered several college presidencies, he replied, "I'd just as soon volunteer for Viet Nam.")

Now after these snippets, and snippets do distort, let me be clear. Although the teacher-image has become perceptibly better in the literature as well as life since World War II, the study of the history of the teacher-image reveals good and bad, year for year, from the early days to the very present.

Quasi-Dickensian Tag Names

The names assigned to some teacher-characters in the short story are fascinating. Of course, it is not known whether the authors intended to assign what seem to be quasi-Dickensian tag names. But still, some names are unpleasant in sound. Other names have a negative connotation which has a negative psychological impact on the reader. Yet, it is interesting to note that not all teacher-characters who have tag names are outcasts or poor teachers. But let us try a few tag names on for size, for fit or misfit:

1) Miss Lizzie (1901 and 1942) is angular, steely, hard, lacking in compassion. As outmoded as the tin lizzie. Ready for the junk heap.

2) Miss Lipscomb (1924) teaches health habits and the reader thinks of lips and comb.

3) Miss Womble (1940) is just totally unpleasant and her name reinforces this feeling. She deals in proverbs and cliches.

When a little girl's panties fall to the floor, she says "Pride cometh before a fall." Incidentally, Miss Womble was created by Frances Pattor, author of Our Miss Dove.

4) Mr. Virgil Fry (1941) is a learned teacher. Virgil recalls the classics. But he is fried by his colleagues and the board -- professionally fried, that is.

5) Miss Oates (1946) has a name which conjures up oats, food for animals, and it seems appropriate for a teacher who misuses the scientific methods and is inept in science experiments with animals.

6) Miss Bangs (1946) is a percussionist, a music teacher who plays the piano and plays it badly.

Both Miss Oates and Miss Bangs are also the creations of Miss Frances Patton.

7) Miss Steele (1951) is strong and rigid, a female gym teacher. Her name conjures up the traits immediately.

8) Miss Courtwright (1956) is reserved. The man who wants her must court her properly, court her right.

9) Miss Eve Grayson (1956) is a foil for Miss Courtwright. She is a woman of ill repute. The reader thinks of the original Eve tempting Adam, and the gray and shadowy quality of Miss Grayson's attributes.

10) Dr. Fugua (1958) conjures up America's favorite four-letter Anglo Saxon expletive, F---- you. And to put it bluntly, Dr. Fugua has been academically screwed.

11) Miss Goldie Parks (1960) has a tag name rich in meaning. When she teaches, she has a glow about her. Parks has a double meaning; the many parks she has never seen and or she parks herself in her mother's home and never really travels as she pretends to.

12) Miss Sweet (1966). How obvious can a tag name for an adored teacher be?

13) Miss Brigit Fawcett (1967) has a tag name which implies coldness. Students call her Miss Frigid Fawcett and Miss Ice Cubes of 1945. Gay Talese is the author.

14) Weasel Wilson (1970) is a black teacher who has spunk. But he feels that he is puny and lacks heritage.

These are but a few of the tag names which I have found. I can not simply conclude that these quasi-Dickensian tag names are mere happenstance, mere coincidence, or the result of my warped imagination.

Methods of Research and Analysis

The analysis of the short story, as I have developed it, has five component parts:

1) Theme and Plot. These terms are not synonymous. Theme refers to the central idea. Plot refers to the series of events that serves to illuminate the theme or to concretize it.

2) Impact of the Teacher-Image as a Human Being. Each reader comes to literature with his own frame of reference, his own biases, his own aspirations. The piece of literature has a cerebral effect as well as a visceral one.

3) The Classroom Performance. The teacher is as he does. The most important function of the teacher is teaching. Alas, too often, the classroom is not portrayed because it is not exciting as the courtroom or the bedroom or the hospital. Of course, I think that this view is erroneous. There is much drama in the classroom, overt and covert. Further, the space limitations of the short story preclude depiction of many classroom scenes.

4) The Verbal Delineation. Here I abstract as faithfully as possible the nouns, and adjectives and adverbs, adjectival and adverbial phrases and clauses which are the essence of the teacher-image. But please be aware that for a real understanding of any literature, only a careful reading of the whole piece will suffice.

5) The Generating Idea. I call these my "pup" tents. A sociological theme generates sociological implications or symbolic expressions. A generating idea provides a convenient base for gross characterizations of sociological subject matter.

An Analysis of One Short Story

Now I should like to apply my research techniques to one of my favorite short stories by Jesse Stuart. After I have told you about "How Educational Progress Came To Greenwood County," you will understand better why I have wanted to make this the basis of a talk to the first September convocation of a public school faculty. In place of the usual pap and drivel, unctuously delivered by the superintendent regarding pep, vigor, vim, vitality, innovations and excavations, I would present Stuart's story, its bite and satire. Sad to say, however, I do not think any

superintendent who knows this story would invite me for this purpose. Sadder to relate, even if I were to receive an invitation, I would thereafter be persona non grata in that school district.

Stuart, Jesse. "How Educational Progress Came to Greenwood County," Arizona Quarterly (Spring 1967), pp. 64 - 76.

Theme and Plot

In education, as elsewhere, change, any change, may be deemed progress. The most exciting innovation in Greenwood County was the spread of a second language, rabbit language. And this was by accident, or at least not by educational design. Old John Hinton, county school teacher in the Hiram Chapel School District of Greenwood County, learned rabbit language (or was afflicted by it) from his children who learned it from their friends and so it spread.

In this delightful satire, Old John, afraid of being fired, because he, like the rest of the county folk, cannot control the wiggling and twitching, once they are exposed to it. Beyond his volition, he simply lapses into rabbit language and rightfully fears for his job.

However, in a stroke of master pedagogy, he decides to transform this linguistic affliction into a curricular coup; he decides to teach rabbit language as a second language. He suspects community acceptance because even the local physician uses it as well as English with his patients. However, many parents do complain. But the county superintendent says:

> . . . I've been in office, elected by the Greenwood County Board of Education, who are in turn elected by the people, for twenty-two years and this is the only new and exciting thing that has happened here since I've been in this office.

> Think of it! Two languages will be spoken by every man and woman and child who can utter a sound, wiggle his ears or nose, or twitch his lips! And from this county, which has never done a thing to create attention since I was born here sixty-two years ago, we will give a new language to our state and country, one that will be easy to learn. I might say that it will be an acquired language people can learn who can't read and write. I'll tell you what I'm going to do! (p. 76)

Thus, Hiram Chapel School District is the first district in Greenwood County to get this new rabbit language into the curriculum. Thus, Old John, instead of being fired, is given a raise in salary. And one month after the opening of school, Old John is driving a large new car, wearing a white shirt, and a large bowtie.

Impact of the Teacher-Image as a Human Being

Incredibly, Old John Hinton, the hayseed teacher, is positive and admirable. With good fortune and a decent amount of foresight he turns the linguistic calamity into a curricular innovation: teaching a second language, even if it is rabbit language learned from children, learned from rabbits.

Since the plot is so novel, what might well have been a country-bumpkin characterization comes through as a full character, an incredible one at that. But he comes to real life when he purchases a new large car, clothing, etc. after his raise in salary.

We see Old John as one of the folks: with his children, with his friends, with the townspeople. He is accepted, friendly, one of his community. Even his folksy name does not detract from his image.

The Classroom Performance

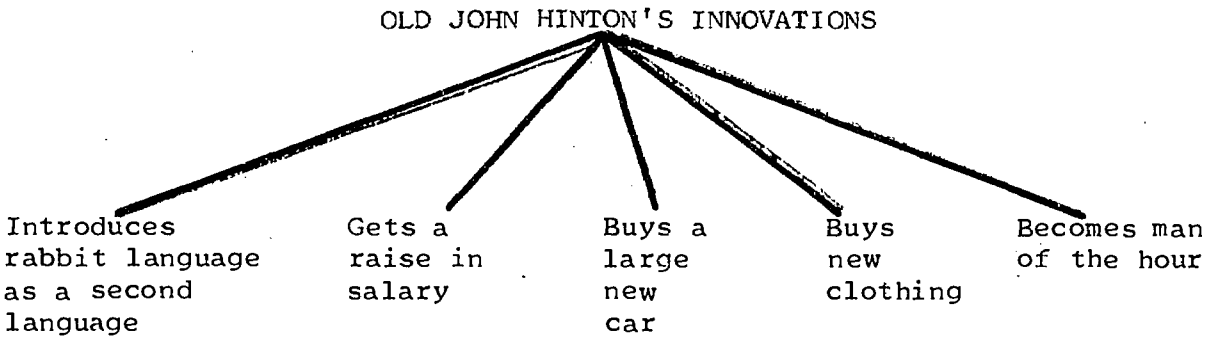
Old John is not a direct reflection of classroom performance. We

are told by the parents who complain to the county superintendent that he teaches rabbit language which they, the children, do not understand. Formerly, they say, at least the children understood his English.

Verbal Delineation (P ve Impact)

Old John was a country school teacher, who taught a one-room school and fifty pupils from the first grade through the eighth . . . I wondered what he'd do when school began . . . when he spoke his native tongue . . . he'd halt in the middle of a sentence . . . his lips would twitch . . . his ears would wiggle like slow moving green leaves fanned by the summer wind . . . his big red blunt nose would wiggle like a treetop pressed hard by a blowing wind . . . would finish what he started in English in the new language . . . his big nose wiggled like an old cabbage stalk in the garden that had frozen and was swollen by autumn frost and was now shaken by a cold autumn wind . . . his big ears flapped like soap-bellied poplar leaves rustling in the late August wind . . . his lips jumped up and down showing his big ugly teeth . . . poor Old John Hinton has it (rabbit language) and what we do for a school teacher come next month . . . more rabbit language than native tongue . . . been trying to go back to his native tongue for school purposes only . . . so he sat before the looking glass day after day trying to get the second language under control . . . he's taught in our school for twenty years . . . have been well satisfied with him . . . now he's brought another language . . . the children . . . all three are wiggling and twitching now like Mr. John . . . this very fine old gentleman and excellent teacher . . . give Gentleman John Hinton a raise in salary . . . has instituted something new into our county schools . . . will be considered great by the people . . . a big monument will be erected in this town to preserve his memory . . . man of the hour . . . best-known and most-talked of teacher in our county . . . had instituted a new language which was spreading by leaps and bounds to other teachers in other schools . . . and progress had at last arrived in Greenwood County.

The Generating Idea



Conclusions

The teacher-image has many roots in the soil of imaginative literature. The importance of perceiving, assessing, and understanding the teacher-image has been explained in several ways. Curiosity is a compelling factor. Also, a segment of the social fabric may be described; it indicates how the role and function of the teacher tend to be perceived by the teachers' contemporaries through the short stories that they write. But what makes the short story important is the critical examination that it affords. Teachers have an opportunity to see themselves as others see them. Such critical examination is vital to growth. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Belok wrote, "... by the same token 'the unexamined profession' is not likely to be one of worth." Certainly, the genre of the short story can satisfy curiosity and critical self-examination as well as the other genres.

The teacher may not always be pleased with his fictional counterpart's image. He may have genuine cause to grieve at the portrayal. He may wish to examine his own status and stature as a teacher and as a person. He may decide to improve. If he is truly a teacher, he believes in the perfectability of man. What better place to start than with himself!

But there will be times when the paradox of the situation will overwhelm him.

Perhaps, then, he can find solace in Foff's profound statement:

> In terms of maximal generality, the teacher is on the one hand an object of hatred and contempt, a kind of public scapegoat. On the other hand, he is the object of love and veneration. The incongruity of such a dichotomy will not appear so great once it is perceived that the most famous scapegoat of western civilization is also regarded as the saviour of mankind.

Implications and Recommendations

1) Let us not be bound to or by the stereotype. Let us deny the self-fulfilling prophecy in this instance.

2) Let us not ever say apologetically, "I am just a teacher." I am still waiting for the first medical doctor to say, "I am just a physician." Or the first lawyer to say, "I am just an attorney."

3) Steinbeck has written that a student does well if he has had three good teachers during his school career. He has really achieved something. Even more, the good teacher's influence on his students, hence on society, is his signature. May you as teachers have your signature writ large and true!

4) Emerson wrote, "That which we are, we are all the while teaching, not voluntarily but involuntarily." To me this means that we are what we are in the dark, unseen, and this is our true image.

5) As long as we continue to be inflexible as teachers, and uncreative, our image will remain sullied and unflattering because creative people like writers, recall with scorn, the inflexible, the uncreative, the routinized. Will tomorrow's writers recall today's teachers with scorn?

6) In the words of Gandhi, "Let us learn each day as if we were to live forever. Let us live each day as if we were to die tomorrow."

7) In a more prosaic vein, we must skin our own skunks or outsiders will skin them for us. Yet, let us not become cannabalistic. Let us take John Updike's caution to heart:

> Hoping to fashion a mirror
> The lover doth polish the face of his beloved,
> Until he produces a skull.

8) One final note. In these days of accountability and performance criteria, a teacher can be held responsible for at least one thing: he can be held accountable for his image -- for what he is -- for what he does. And what he is and what he does colors his image or his image as it is perceived. In the words of Harold Carter, "Any teacher who chooses to make a difference will make one."

Colleagues and Friends, Pogo has said it well. "We have met the enemy and he is us!"

Thank you.

Dr. Albert Nissman

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* Most references and direct quotations in this paper are cited in detail in this dissertation.