

A Novel Approach to Creative Writing

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1. Introduction

There are many kinds of writing skills one could teach in a college curriculum: technical writing, practical writing, expository writing, critical writing, journalistic writing—and creative writing.

Creative writing courses, as taught in universities in the west, are based on the premise that being a writer is not a vocation or genetic disposition that you either have or don't have, but is a skill which can be developed or acquired by anyone who wants to take the trouble.

I tested this hypothesis on a class of senior English majors who had signed up for a generically described "Writing" class. Within the first few classes, the small class size and sense of camaraderie among the students made me realize that this course could very easily be transformed into a writers' workshop.

Students had been writing from the first class. They had begun to keep journals which they turned in after class and which I read and commented on and returned back as soon as possible. In their journals they could write about anything. They weren't writing to me although they knew I would be reading what they wrote. They were encouraged to write as often as possible, at least 3-5 times week.

What was important was that they got in the habit of writing, of finding something worthy of comment in their world. Topics could be about what they did that day, what was going on in the world or, as happened more often, about how they were feeling about a particular situation that occurred in their lives.

Senior students feel a lot of pressure to find jobs and this pressure often came out in their writings. Along with that pressure was the concomitant process of self-evaluation to determine what they wanted out of a job and what kind of company or future they were suited for. I saw this as another vehicle for looking at the question, "WHO AM I?" and

didn't fail to comment about this in their journals.

This question, I emphasized, is the basis for all writing. Either the writer writes to understand himself better or is writing of specific or universal human experiences to have his readers understand themselves better.

To emphasize this, I introduced a series of creativity exercises, designed to stimulate their minds, motivate their writing and provide them with some tools for writing.

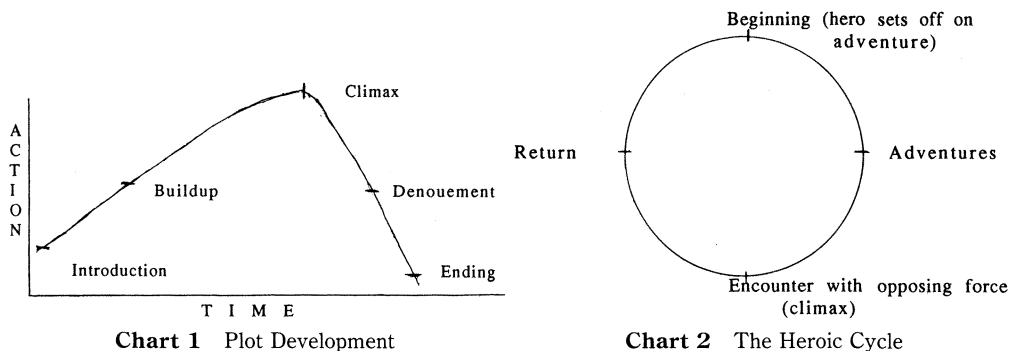
By this time in the course, it was becoming apparent to me that in our writing we would have to do something which was beyond the scope of most writing courses, that the content of the course needed to be congruent with the creative values it was espousing. This required a new approach, a larger context on which to hang the intermediate stages and lessons of creative writing. This novel approach I was looking for turned out to be the writing of a novel itself.

Before and after the introduction of the novel as the vehicle for writing, there were many other writing assignments in class: observation and inference, description, characterization, point of view, conversation, feelings, metaphors. Although the students didn't realize it at the time, I knew these would be helpful to them once they got started on their novels.

Introducing the novel took most of one class. The goal, as I explained it, was to write a long work of fiction. Since I would not be an arbiter of quality and assuming students would do their best work writing in a second language, their marks were to be determined by the amount of effort they chose to put into the assignment. The rough guidelines were: 30 pages for a C, 45 for a B and 60 for an A. Anything less than 30 typewritten pages would be unacceptable. It was a strict contract assignment.

To calm down their initial reaction of panic and terror, I suggested a work consisting of 10 chapters, of roughly three to six pages apiece. This made it seem more manageable. Students knew they could write three to six pages. Plus, they were also writing senior theses and seminar papers so were already used to the idea of a long work.

I then lectured about plot outline and form. I showed them the typical linear plot development graph with introduction, development, climax, and denouement. [Chart 1] I also showed them the cyclical form based on the construction of heroic myths and fairy tales—of departure, encounter and return. [Chart 2]



2. Writing The Novels

Plots

We were ready to begin. The first step was to come to class with a plot summary. I warned them that this would be the most difficult part of the whole assignment since this is where their creativity and imagination would be tested. Along with the plot outline I wanted to know the setting and the main characters.

The following week, they submitted a 10-chapter plot outline. The outline would be the framework for the story. It was from this initial formulation that the rest of the writing would flow. They had to decide on setting, on where their story would take place, whether it would be realistic or fantastic. They also had to introduce the characters and write short descriptions of what they looked like and what their personalities were like. Then, of course, what happened, chapter by chapter. Having a 10-chapter guideline was helpful in organizing the plot structure.

It was at this point, as at the beginning of a long distance marathon race, that the class began to separate, to go their own ways at their own rates.

One student decided to write a series of short stories instead of one long piece. One student decided to write a handbook for homestay students. And one student decided to write a series of travel experiences in third person. One decided to retell several Japanese fairy tales and write one original story. All were acceptable alternatives, within the spirit of a major writing assignment.

Of the full-length novels written, several plots were along familiar lines and some were quite original. A. Maruyama's story was about an alien who comes into the life of a

young girl whose parents are having domestic difficulties and who helps solve the problem. T. Iino's story "The Pass" was about three children who venture away from their home and go over the pass into a deep dark forest.

T. Ota's "The Curious Fairies" was about two fairies who travel from the United States to Japan to visit their old friends and, being invisible, are able to intervene to help with some of their problems. C. Minakoshi wrote a murder mystery, "The Murder of Peach Child," based on her experience as choreographer of the "Peace Child" musical. Y. Nakaoka also wrote a story set around a play, a school festival drama club, in which the quiet and conscientious costume girl exchanges places with her image in her mirror who has a more assertive and a bit evil personality.

N. Kono's "Tomorrow" was a pure romance novel, in which boy meets girl, boy meets another girl, girl moves on. Y. Naka's story was about a young boy who doesn't like school but does like computers and somehow enters into a computer game where his life is threatened by the person playing the game.

Few of the stories were dull or straightforward. All had some degree of complexity, tension and conflict that required resolution. Several were more than just stories and carried a clear message. M. Hiramoto's "Only the Sun Knows It" was one such case. Her story was about three 10-year old boys from Japan, America and Africa who one day wake up in each other's bodies. After several weeks they find themselves meeting each other at an oasis in the desert.

In terms of structure, this novel was most clearcut. The opening chapter takes place in the desert showing the three boys talking toward the oasis. The point of view is the sun who sees it all. The next three chapters tell how each of the three boys woke up in a different body. The next set of three chapters describe how they adjusted to being in their new bodies. Chapter 8 shows them arriving at the desert and meeting each other. In Chapter 9, they tell what they had learned. In Chapter 10, the sun takes over the narration and gives an Envoi.

T. Inoue's series of short stories, "Voices," actually had a cohesion as well. All nine stories in this collection had three high school friends as main characters. All stories were told in first person. So when Yuka was the protagonist of one story, Nana and Saki were in the background. Even when it wasn't their story, we got to know more about them and see them evolve, until the final chapter where they all come together in the form of

letters to themselves.

First Chapters

Soon, the first chapters came in. All along, I had stressed the cardinal rule of fiction writing: SHOW, DON'T TELL! Using opening paragraphs from other writers like Ernest Hemingway, Truman Capote, Raymond Carver and David Leavitt, I could demonstrate how a writer does not take the reader right into the front door immediately but guides him slowly, setting the stage by describing the setting or characters. In this sense, I pointed out, they should pretend that the reader was watching a movie. What first impressions do you get in a film, even before the credits come on? That's what you need to do in your writing.

The following were some notable beginnings:

All the leaves had turned red and yellow. Grasses were dead and a lot of purple, white and pink cosmoses had come out. It was a very beautiful day in autumn. The autumn sky was pale blue and very high. And the air was clear and fresh. In the cosmoses, three children were playing. They picked flowers and threw them at each other.

(“The Pass” by T. Iino)

Pedaling a bicycle in a hurry toward the coffee shop, a young woman pulled up the sleeve of her grey sweater and looked at her watch. It was 9:17 in the morning.

The sun was shining softly. A gentle fall breeze blew the young woman's long, straight brown hair. Only the laughing of kids playing catch and the bark of the dog could be heard in distance on the street. Downtown on Sunday morning was quiet enough to make people forget the noise on weekdays. But the young woman was too busy to have any interest in the atmosphere on the street. The cross around her neck was swinging.

(“Tomorrow” by N. Kono)

At first, what I want to say about this story is that I'm very sorry that I have to tell such an incredible thing. But I think that someone has to tell it, because we have to prevent tragedies like this from ever happening again. Now my hurt heart is recovering and I'm also trying to start other new things. Even though I'm trying to do so, I sometimes feel the memory in the bottom of my heart will never forget. So I think if I write about it, this feeling will be a part of a novel, just a story in one summer.

(“Murder of Peach Child” by C. Minokoshi)

One, two, three, the street lights are coming on. The cool wind is blowing from the lake, Tahoe. The neon lights of the hotels and the casinos excite the visitors but not as usual, not as usual.

(“The Curious Fairies” by T. Ota)

A little girl was standing at the tall gate of the apartment, and she murmured, “The apartment looks like a shoe locker in school.” Also, she was surprised that each family could live in such a same box in different ways. Her name was Ai. She was 12 years old. She liked chattering and singing. She had many friends and everybody liked her. She [seemed a] very active girl outwardly.

(“Alien” by A. Maruyama)

The desert spreads out boundlessly. There is only dry sand everywhere. The flowing sand creates large and small hills every minute by the wind. The wind plays a sad song. That is the only sound in the desert. The blue sky and sunshine know the desert. The sun is shining on the desert without tiring.

(“Only the Sun Knows It” by M. Hiramoto)

The sky before the sunset seemed like the hem of a curtain. Then it became an orange-red and the full-of-light sea changed to dull white. After a while it was replaced by distant blue-purple. The dark blue drape fell and spread over everything. Night had come. This was a busy port town in which trucks and men moved around in cargo work during the daytime but very few people were seen on the street at night. Only the sounds of motorcycles, cars, shoes (and whispers and sweet sighs) of young people echoing against the concrete warehouses. The lively roughness of outside during the daytime almost transferred to the inside of the buildings with the arrival of the darkness. Though this night sight may seem to be strange compared with the silence of common bedtowns, it is rather modest compared with the boisterousness of the heart of the big city in the night.

(“The Night Wraps Everything” by N. Fujita)

In all these cases, the writers have created a mood, established a setting or introduced characters. The tone is clearly set and the individual voices have committed themselves to telling their stories.

Characterizations

Although I encouraged the writers to SHOW what their characters were like, it was natural at some point to get a physical description along with some characterization.

Some good examples:

A girl, who wore a red skirt and a white blouse, threw flowers at a little boy. The girl, Aiko, was six years old and had straight long hair and big eyes. The little boy began to cry. His name was Akira. He was Aiko's brother and four years old. His eyes were as big as his sister's and he was a rather nervous boy. He always followed his sister, Aiko, because he was too young to have his own friends. But Aiko didn't like Akira following her. Akira was a slow walker, so she often had to wait for him. And she always ran holding hands with Akira behind her friends.

(“The Pass” by T. Iino)

Snow Man appeared, I thought immediately. His body was covered with snow. He was a little fat and of medium height.

“Good evening,” he said politely, taking off his coat and hat. His gentle eyes and silver hair appeared. At a glance I liked his warm personality because he resembled my father.

(“My Birthday on a Snowy Day” by K. Komatsu)

Her older brother, Shingo, was listening to a record with a loud volume in the next room. He was a junior high school student. He liked soccer and listening to noisy music. Ai couldn't understand why such music was good, but he insisted that it was up to date.

“Hullo,” he said when Ai entered his room. He was doing something humping his back.

“Hi, what are you doing,” Ai asked him.

“Well, I'm pressing the school bag,” he answered bluntly not raising his head.

“That's nice,” Ai said, but she could not understand why such a thin dirty pressed bag was nice. She always believed that what her brother thought was nice was nice. She liked him and was proud of him.

(“The Alien” by A. Maruyama)

My mother didn't work at that time. She stayed at home all day long, except for going shopping. She was short and fat then (well, I should say she is thinner now, because she worries about me). She often invited her friends to my house and chatted for a while or was engaged in knitting by the closed window, which gave her a nice view.

[and]

Mr. Takagi was my classroom teacher and seemed to be fifty or so. He was almost bald with short hair and wore thick glasses, which he wiped often, at least three times during each class. He also cleared his throat a lot. These two actions were his

characteristics and some students imitated them. That was so real and funny.

(“The White Sweater” by T. Inoue)

She was forlorn, certainly forlorn. Her parents made a large split by trifles, by and by divorce without sewing it up, when she was a high school student. As she grew up watching the ugly exchanges again and again, she became disgusted with them a long time ago. So, no matter that there were some kind of loving feelings which were given to her by her parents, she still completely rejected living together with them.

Her lover, who should have been her fresh start, was a cool guy in the town. He loved rock ‘n’ roll music. He always dressed up like Steven Taylor of Aerosmith. He always gave off an odor of Musk. He was a daydreamer. In other words, he was just another nice-looking guy who was enthusiastic about R & R, who smelled of men and liked to be spoiled or be given good loving by women’s compassion.

In spite of that, she was proud that she could walk with someone like him then. On the other hand, they looked back at everyone and let them spread rumors as they liked. Through the innocent “Cheap Thrills” life, he drugged like mad, had another affair and finally killed himself.

She was fairly miserable. It was penetrating into her mind that she was always drawn into a swirl and thrown out from it though she didn’t do anything at all. The warp of what she had felt accumulated in countless days was spun with the woof of what she had felt from time to time. Thus her loneliness was woven. She wouldn’t try to unknot it. She wouldn’t intend to share it with anyone. She loved her own sorrow. She firmly resolved that she must not live wishing for love from now on. Even if she trusted someone just a little, she would be contrary to it.

(“The Night Wraps Everything” by N. Fujita)

Conversations

Several students had a talent for writing conversational dialogue. N. Kono’s story “Tomorrow” relies on dialogue to shade characterization and advance the plot. She very skillfully captures the rhythm and nuance of American conversational idioms:

“What do you think of him?” Bev asked Angie curiously, eating her pasta.

“Who? You mean, him?” Angie bit into her hamburger.

“Yep! The new face. Don’t you think he is cute?” Bev said excitedly.

Angie giggled.

“Do you think he is married? I didn’t see him wearing a ring, though,” Bev almost forgot about her pasta.

Angie tried to stop giggling seeing Bev’s serious face, but she couldn’t.

“What’s so funny?” Bev put her fork on Angie’s plate.

“Nothing,” Angie managed to stop giggling.

“How come you are always like this? You never talk about guys. You never go out with the guys at the office, even if you are the most popular woman. Why? Do you happen to be...you know, a person who is not interested in men?” Bev asked Angie seriously. There was a short pause in their conversation. They looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

[and]

Angie noticed the light was flashing on the telephone and pushed it.

“Hi, this is Tracy. We are having a party next week. I want you to come. Call me, O.K.? Bye.” She heard the message and tried to stop the answering machine. But there was one more message on it.

“Stop the crazy music! I’m on the phone, Chuck....” It was her sister Jena’s voice. She was shouting at somebody, probably at her new boyfriend. “Hi, Angie! Guess what?” I passed the audition! Can you believe it? I’m gonna be in a musical. It’ll be called...uh...Gee, I forget the name of it. Oh, yes! “TOMORROW” or something. Anyway, I’m in heaven. Call me if you can, all right? Bye-bye.”

[and]

“Hello.” Angie heard Ginnie’s cheerful voice on the phone and felt relieved.

“Hi, Ginnie. It’s me, Angie,” Angie tried to sound normal.

“Oh, hi, Angie. What’s up?”

“Nothing, but I wanna ask you something,” Angie’s voice was faint.

“What is it?” Ginnie replied.

“I know it’s a stupid question, but...” Angie hesitated to tell Ginnie.

“What? Tell me.” Ginnie said gently.

“Have you ever seen a person who looks just like you somewhere before?”

Angie dared to ask and waited for Ginnie’s answer quietly. She heard a laughing voice of a man over the phone.

“Angie? I’m sorry. I couldn’t hear you. What did you say again?” Ginnie said cheerfully.

“No, no. It’s O.K. I gotta go now. I have to meet somebody. So...see you, Gin-nie,” Angie hung up in a hurry and sighed.

The following scene from Chapter 7 of “Alien” by A. Maruyama takes place when Ai brings the alien home and takes him to see her brother Shingo:

She opened the door of Shingo’s room and said, “Hey, Shingo, look! look!”

He was pressing his school bag as usual.

“This is an alien!”

He stopped working and turned his face.

“What is this slime guy?” he said frankly. She was a little disappointed to hear his response.

“Shingo, this is an alien. He comes from Lala star.”

“Lulu star,” the alien interrupted.

“Well...well, ‘Lulu star’.”

“Hello, Shingo,” he made a deep bow.

“Nice to meet you,” Shingo said briefly.

“ ‘Nice to meet you?’ You said only ‘Nice to meet you?’ Aren’t you surprised? He is an alien.”

“I know. Well, it’s no wonder there is such a strange thing in this strange world. Don’t worry. I won’t tell Mother on him.”

“Well...well...but...,” Ai tried to say something.

“Ah, slime guy, remember not to soil my school bag and not to touch my CD player. It’s new. You got it? If you do it I’ll never forgive you. You got it?”

“I...I got it,” he answered in a low voice.

“Right! It’s time for you kids to go to bed. Bye-bye.” He started to work again. Ai and the alien looked at each other and she murmured, “Huh, he is also a kid. He acts so grown up. He is too apathetic.”

Climaxes

All the stories had some climax or turning point. This was sometimes a central event, a cathartic experience or a moment of insight. In the case of “The Pass” it occurs when the children successfully escape from the castle of the King of the Forest and begin their return home. In “The Murder of Peach Child” it is the encounter in the hospital after the third attempt of murder (the first two were successful) where the narrator admits to knowing who the murderer was. In “Alien” the turning point moment comes when Pochi the alien, having transformed himself and shown his superhuman abilities, has a premonition that Mother is in trouble and needs help.

In “Sumire in the Mirror” Sumire’s friends, Miki and Keisuke go to her house to see her:

“Sumire?”

“Come in,” she whispered.

They opened the door and were terribly astonished. She was sitting on her bed,

holding her knees. But she was about to disappear.

“Sumire? What happened?”

“I’m going to come back soon,” Mirror Sumire whispered in a disappearing voice.

“Where? Where are you from?” Miki asked, taking Sumire’s hands. At the same time, Keisuke turned over the big mirror and cried out.

“This mirror! You came from this, didn’t you? That’s the real Sumire.”

“I saw this Sumire in the play!” Miki screamed on seeing her and murmured in surprise, “She’s crying?”

In the mirror, Sumire was sleeping on the bed. Her eyes were closed but big tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“She began to understand something important,” Mirror Sumire answered with a sad smile. “I knew the time would come when I must go back. My plot succeeded as I planned, but in fact I wasn’t accepted by anybody,” she began to speak out everything. She looked sad but her expression showed satisfaction with her week.

“It was an interesting week for me,” she added cheerfully when her story was over. By that time, her disappearing shape became clear again.

“Now I’ll go back in the mirror. I’ll hand sleeping Sumire from the mirror. As soon as you lay her on this bed, you must go out of this house so that you would not be noticed by her mother. Everything will come back to the time when we changed. Whether you’ll tell her this happening or not is up to you.”

Mirror Sumire smiled to them and said, “Thank you.”

She came back to the mirror world. Keisuke and Miki were seeing her in it but she disappeared soon after she handed the sleeping Sumire to them. There weren’t reflected any shapes in it. And the clock with the date showed 9:12 on Thursday, the eighth. That was the night of the day when Keisuke cheered up the depressed Sumire. Though Keisuke and Miki were worried about Sumire, they laid her on the bed and went out of her house very quietly.

(“Sumire in the Mirror” by Y. Nagaoka)

In “Only the Sun Knows It,” the three boys are separately approaching an oasis in the desert:

The three boys were welcomed by the oasis. Their tiredness completely changed into comfort. They enjoyed seeing many things. Everything that existed in the oasis gave them much energy. They felt full of energy and hope. They ate many fruits. They moistened their throats. Cool wind, singing of birds, beautiful colors of flowers, comfortable wetness in the air; they were all that the boys wanted to get. They thought that they did not want anymore. Everything was perfect.

Then they heard the sound of water. The transparent sounds tempted them to go near. They walked for a few minutes and they saw a sheet of the water.

“It is a lake!”

“They all jumped into the water. And each of them heard the sounds of someone else jumping into the water. So they took their heads out of the water all at once.

“That is me!” they cried out.

They all saw themselves. In other words, Kohei who was in Konya’s mind saw Kohei; Konya who was in Create’s mind saw Konya; Create who was in Kohei’s mind saw Create.

“What is happening?”

[End of chapter]

In T. Inoue’s “The Goldfish,” the narrator is taking her father’s goldfish tank to a nearby river to deposit a fish who had just died. She is angry with her father who has opposed her chance to study abroad:

I held up the tank to my face and looked at the goldfish. They were beautiful. The water reflected the light and its reflection looked glittering like diamonds. It was another world. Goldfish were swimming in that fantastic world, except one fish floating. I picked up the poor fish. “Bye-bye.” Then I let her go in the river. It was as if, free from the tank, she swam again to a stream under the light. It was so beautiful. I watched until she disappeared into the darkness. Then I looked down at the tank by my foot. Losing the light, it did not glitter anymore.

Suddenly, I had an idea. Without pausing, I poured all the goldfish into the river. At first they flocked together, but in the next moment, they started to swim as they liked. It was so gorgeous. It felt good to watch them.

I was standing for a while before I noticed that I was holding the empty tank. I stared at it for a second. Then I threw it with all my strength against a rock in the river. The glass tank shattered into many pieces. [End of story]

Conclusions

In our discussion about plot, I had mentioned how important it was to end the story with as much care as it was begun. By the time they came to the final chapters, I’m sure they were quite tired with it and the whole project. But, I reminded them of movies they had seen where after the action is finished, there is usually one more scene that takes place after the last real sequence of action, a scene that restores the sense of tranquility or re-establishes the setting from the opening scene, an upbeat gesture to leave the reader with a sense of contentment, completion or satisfaction. The following are good examples of this:

After a week, Aiko went back to the pass. It was a fine day and about 4 o'clock. She climbed the stony pass. At the top of the hill, she looked at the scene beyond the pass. There was the next town. She looked at many houses, the streetcar station and few trees.

Streetcars stopped at the station and a lot of people got off the train. They walked to their home. All of them turned to red by the evening sun. Aiko went back to her home, too.

[End]

(“The Pass” by T. Iino)

Ai didn't know whether the things went better or not but she felt happy because everybody lived a life calmly. She was thankful for it from the bottom of her heart.

[End]

(“Alien” by A. Maruyama)

As for Mitsu, before the police came to us, he disappeared after the show. Even though he is still wanted for murder, now it's only me who knows where he is. He is in cold, salty and blue water...

[End]

(“The Murder of Peach Child” by C. Minokoshi)

The next morning, we had fine weather. The blue sky contrasted beautifully with the white snow. On the path from my house, there were some new footprints and they could be seen over there. I have been watching the scene through the window since he had left. I felt sad. But after a while I smiled. Because I got his message from the sparkling surface of snow. It said, “Don't forget. Dreams will come true someday. At that time we will meet again.”

[End]

(“My Birthday on a Snowy Day” by K. Komatsu)

It was getting to be daybreak. The lights below started to be turned off slowly as if they were counting the minutes, seconds, to tell Keiko that the time when she would leave Korea was getting near.

“I wish there was not that sea over there,” Keiko murmured.

“I also wish.”

They stared at the sea over the faint lights. It was changing its color slowly. Black, navy, blue. At last it started to shine. The day came....

[End]

(“Keiko's Treasure” by M. Murakami)

“Angie, where are you going?” Tracy asked, puzzled completely.

“The airport,” Angie answered smiling.

“For what?”

“For flying to New York.”

“New York?”

“Yup! See you around, Tracy.” Angie started to pedal the bicycle.

Astounded at Angie, Tracy was just looking at her back. When Angie went about ten meters away from Tracy, she stopped and turned around.

“Will you do me a favor?” Angie said in a loud voice.

Tracy answered, “Yeah.”

“Call my boss and tell him I’ll take two weeks off.” Angie’s face sparkled with joy.

[End]

(“Tomorrow” by N. Kono)

And in her series of short stories, T. Inoue ends with a series of letters that each of her main characters writes to themselves on the eve of their high school graduation. This is from the final, title story, “The Voices:”

Dear Nana,

It is very strange to write a letter to myself in the future. Maybe, ten years from now, when I read this, I will be so different. I may be married and have children. I hope I will be happy then.

What have I learned in my high school days? A lot of things—mathematics, world history, music—no, I’m joking. Well, to put it in one word, it’s “love.”

Passion. Desire. Forgiveness. Devotion. Strength. Love has various aspects. Even though he has faults, I love him. Even if he makes a mistake, my love will not disappear. I learned how wonderful it was to experience the budding of love.

Love has power. Love can change people, their life, their points of view. Love is energy.

Love is my everything. Koji is everything.

Nana

Dear Yuka,

Tomorrow is the graduation ceremony. Now I am going to begin my life. I feel nervous a little, but I’m excited, too.

How many people find the place where they want to be? How many people find what they really want to do? Lots of people are in the stream of the routine life and miss their dreams. Being spoiled by people who make the same sigh as you. Not making an effort to change the world. Not looking up. Feeling comfortable with people similar to them. Regretting about yesterday. Being indifferent to tomorrow.

I’ve just started to walk my own way. I have found what I want to do in the future. I want to be an interpreter and use that ability as a volunteer. I know it will be a long way to accomplish it. It will be hard. It’s going to be tough.

In my high school days, I was so protected, like a baby tree in a greenhouse. I

didn't know how strong the wind was and how cold the rain was. Having the sunshine as much as possible, I felt spring would go on forever. Now I will be a little tree on the ground outside the greenhouse and stand alone in the sun. in the storm, whatever. I will also experience winters and shiver with coldness, longing for spring to come. Yes! It is not until I will live outside that I will realize the value of spring. I am young. I am just at the beginning of my life.

I only just started to think of my life and myself. I am facing the way I am. I am loving myself.

So far, to me, love is caring about another person as much as myself. I don't want to lose my vision by falling in love. Otherwise, what is my life? What is the meaning of my life? Who am I? Not knowing myself, I can't know someone else appropriately. Without looking inside myself, I can't open my heart.

I'll graduate tomorrow.

Yuka

Dear Saki,

I can't wait for graduation. The minute I'll enter Motomo University is coming. That moment my dream will come true. I devoted myself to do it all the time. It was a long time. But now I don't have to be good in front of teachers anymore. I'm free!!!!

I'll do something interesting and have a lot of fun! I will get out of this monotonous life. I feel like a bird who is going to fly from her cage. The adventure!

What will happen to me? I don't know. It doesn't matter for now. I'm just jumping into the bright future.

Saki

(“Voices” by T. Inoue)

3. Summary

The work cited in this paper represents one semester's work of 12 senior college students and an auditing graduate. If the underlying agenda of the course and the assignment was to consider and address the question, “Who Am I?” then the novels revealed the variety of students' attitudes, abilities, experiences and expression. Although most of the stories were written in third person, there was a very clear voice of the author in the background.

These voices were reflected in the themes they chose. In several stories, the main character goes through a physically transformative experience—into a computer, into a mir-

ror, over a mountain pass. In many cases, the stories show an emotional or mental transformation, some rite of passage of growing up, as in “Keiko’s Treasures,” “Voices,” and “Sumire in the Mirror.” Some stories’ physical and spiritual transformation reflect the narrative structure of the heroic cycle, which I had introduced to them earlier, but I don’t think there was any conscious effort to follow this form. Although I thought I was teaching them how to write, they had come to the course with a latent talent already. All I needed to do was release it and channel it. The stories they wrote, the themes they chose, the way they told their stories were, for the most part, very accessible, with a personal style and an ear for storytelling.

Without planning to write anything profound, they naturally found themes of universal significance, put their characters into heroic dimensions and crafted stories that conformed to all the conventions of fiction. And what is most striking about this is that I believe that they did this quite naturally and spontaneously.

The finished products ranged from 45–110 typewritten pages. My role at the beginning was as a sort of coach and cheerleader, encouraging them on to keep writing, to meet the deadlines. Toward the end, though, I felt less like a coach and more like an obstetrician. The last weeks were hard. The students were tired. But they had to continue, in order to give birth to the children they had conceived and carried all these months. I could only stand by and watch them go through their labor pains and be a helpful midwife.

I corrected grammar, punctuation, spelling and other technical issues and worked with students on other changes. They all had submitted detailed chapter-by-chapter plot outlines beforehand and so they knew where their stories were going. All they had to do, then, was write them out.

All chapters went through a number of revisions—first drafts, second drafts and final drafts. Where the final draft was the first typewritten one, I also corrected one more time for typographical errors. Where students had typed all along, the corrections were current.

I usually went over my corrections with the students, week by week, as they turned their chapters in. In some cases, their English was weak, incoherent or unclear. These conferences helped me understand what they were trying to say and have them say it more clearly.

Some of the greatest problems I encountered were with students who wrote out their

stories in Japanese and then translated them into English. For the most part, I could understand what the author was trying to say, but she wasn't saying it in proper English. These conferences sometimes required a second student to sit in, who could be consulted for translation of particular terms or phrases.

In some cases, like N. Fujita's "The Night Wraps Everything," this Japanese/English discrepancy created some very fine images and rhetorical devices. Words and phrases were sometimes used in an unconventional but proximate way that gave the writing an imagistic or poetic quality. Her writing was so densely impressionistic that I didn't need to have her clarify or simplify it sometimes. This was her voice, her story—and her style.

The rewriting conferences I think were some of the most useful learning experiences of the whole project. Here we were analyzing language from the inside out. Students were trying to express something, to tell their story. And in order to do this, they had to use all the English skills they had learned in ten years of English education—grammar, vocabulary, idioms, sentence structure—in crossing the language bridge from Japanese to English.

Most of the mistakes made were simple ones, learned and forgotten in middle school—dropped articles, wrong prepositions, subject/predicate agreement, misplaced modifiers, spelling, syntax. I tried to be very careful in my corrections and interventions never to change what a student wanted to say, only to clarify it grammatically.

The sentences they were correcting were, perhaps for the first time, not ones found in a grammar textbook or translation exercise, but were their own. Each sentence had a purpose it had to perform so it had to be clear and correct. Seeing how they could say what they wanted to was a constant source of remembering, acknowledging, and marvelling.

Eventually, one by one, the completed works began to come in and then it was my turn to marvel. Although I had been reading each novel chapter by chapter, I felt a little overwhelmed to see the finished products presented in toto. In most cases, the finished work exceeded the sum of its parts. The assembled chapters united into cohesive novels. T. Inoue's series of short stories, too, has a progression, completeness and coherence which I could only see reading them altogether. Like marathon runners at the end of their race, or mothers at childbirth, it was a happy day when they turned in their finished novels.

Benefits

I think there were three main benefits students derived from this project.

The first benefit was that it was a culminating activity, a performance exhibiting academic skills and abilities they had been learning through their entire education, not just English education. In completing this assignment, they had to go beyond anything they had ever done before and use all the resources at their disposal. And unlike their senior theses, this had to be written in English. It was a project worthy of certifying their qualification to graduate from our university as English majors.

A second benefit echoed back to the early days of the course, where I had introduced a model of creative behavior and a series of exercises designed to develop creative attitudes and behavior. The dominant metaphor was The Wall, the semipermeable membrane representing their behavioral boundaries. Creative behavior is climbing over these personal walls, pushing past your boundaries, doing new things, taking risks, saying “Yes, I Can!”

At the beginning of these exercises, there was a lot of grumbling and complaining, the expression of negativity and fear. But after several weeks, students looked forward to conquering the new challenges that would come. There was the same initial reaction when the assignment of writing a novel was announced. And also, at the end, there was the same sense of exhilaration of having accomplished a great challenge. They had moved, in a very real, practical way from “No, I Can’t!” to “Yes, I Can!” This success, I think, is visceral, and one they will always remember when facing future challenges.

A third benefit was the central theme of the class, the question “Who Am I?” By dipping deep into their imaginations yet needing to master control of a foreign language, they had the opportunity to look at themselves, as students exhibiting technical skills, and as writers, finding their voices with something to say. Writing their own works brought them a little closer into colleague with writers of fiction they have read in the past and will read in the future. The stories they told came from their minds and hearts and whether written in first or third person, it was their voices which they were using to express a story, theme or message. For all of these students, this was the first work of fiction they had ever written. Learning that they could write long and coherently provided at least a short-term boost to their self-confidence and perhaps a long term sense of empowerment.

The novels these students presented me by the end of the semester were the greatest gift a teacher could receive from his students. It was a work of great dedication and toil, done in collaboration with their teacher. And in a sense it was their ticket to graduation. They had completed this journey through their school life and were now ready to move on into the next phase of their lives.

To repeat from Saki's letter to herself in T. Inoue's "Voices:" "What will happen to me? I don't know. It doesn't matter for now. I'm just jumping into the bright future."

With their completed novels tucked under their arm, these students were ready to jump into their bright futures. I was proud to see them off.