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# Keeping Mason's 'Shiloh' C.R.I.S.P.

Charlie Sweet

*Eastern Kentucky University, charlie.sweet@eku.edu*

Hal Blythe

*Eastern Kentucky University, hal.blythe@eku.edu*

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## Keeping Mason's "Shiloh" C.R.I.S.P.

### *Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet*

*Hal and Charlie, Emeritus Foundations Professors at Eastern Kentucky University, are presently co-directors of ECU's Learning Center.*

#### Introduction

As Kansas foreshadowed for us in "Dust in the Wind" (1978), "nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky." This past year the two of us have transitioned from teachers into our new roles as co-directors of the university's Teaching & Learning Center, but we have still spent a lot of time in the classroom—as observers. One of our unit's services is assessing the classroom presentation of instructors, especially that of new faculty, and we have been overwhelmed by one major pedagogical problem shared by over 90% of the teachers. In short, no matter the discipline, a common problem stands out like browned vegetables in the fridge—many instructors lack clear organization, which results in less student learning. As one perplexed student told us, "I just never knew where we were at."

During our career as instructor-scholars, we have published twelve articles on Bobbie Ann Mason's most famous short story, including the recent "Using Mason's 'Shiloh' to Teach a Scholarly Frame of Mind" in ESTSF 5.2. What we'd like to offer this time is a sure-fire pedagogical strategy to provide strong organization to your classroom methodology and hence increased student learning. In fact, if you follow the five-step C.R.I.S.P. approach the next time you teach "Shiloh" or any other topic, we'll guarantee your students will know exactly where you're "at" and will learn more deeply.

But before we start, let's try some self-analysis. Do any of these descriptors fit your typical teaching methodology?

- ◆ You arrive after the bell has sounded
- ◆ You begin class like an epic, *in medias res*
- ◆ You don't billboard at the start of class what you'd like to accomplish that period
- ◆ You neglect to tie anything in the period to previous classes.

- ◆ You race through the material so fast (because you have to cover it) that you don't have time to distinguish between major and minor points and emphasize the most important
- ◆ You don't have a "Coming Attractions" segment
- ◆ You shout last-minute instructions to the class as they flee from you to their next educational adventure.

If you answered "Yes" to any of the previous descriptors, do we have an article for you.

**Contextualize!** Begin class by clearly introducing what critical thinking guru Gerald Nosich calls "the fundamental and powerful concepts" to be covered that session. Literary works don't exist in isolation, but are parts of larger units, so a good pre-class exercise for you is to start by making a list of possible concepts to cover.

For instance, in Mason's "Shiloh" ask yourself what fundamental and powerful concepts do the students most need to develop a grasp of the story. Several major ideas come immediately to mind:

- ◆ Women writers/"Down-home feminism"
- ◆ Post-modernism
- ◆ Southern Literature/Southern Gothic
- ◆ Minimalism
- ◆ Post Viet-Nam sensibility.

Obviously, even in a graduate seminar you would have trouble covering this short list of possibilities, but would you really want to if you could? If you wish your students to be active learners, to climb up Bloom's revised taxonomy past Remembering and Understanding, to develop critical and creative thinking skills, and to learn deeply, you need to limit the session to a couple of basic ideas that they can then use to grasp "Shiloh," whether applying, analyzing, or evaluating.

So, you might begin class with "Today we'll be delving into Mason's 'Shiloh,' not so much as an isolated story but as 1) an extension of the Southern Gothic and 2) an excellent example of the post-modern trend toward minimalism." Be sure to provide basic definitions of these fundamental and powerful concepts. Now you and your students have twin foci that will be developed throughout the class and beyond.

**Review!** Segue from where you've been to where you are going. Research demonstrates that students learn best when they attach new knowledge to old knowledge, but you have to prime their pumps by showing them how. Like Whitman's spider, you have to model connecting those filaments out of your brain to previously explored promontories.

Concentrate on major connections between where you are and where you have been rather than minor relationships such as two characters from different works having the same name. Every course should have a controlling question or its own fundamental and powerful concepts to which you can tie to any given session. For instance, we always focus all our lit classes on one core concept: art reflects its culture. In American lit courses, that particular cultural monomyth translates into the core idea that all American lit, no matter its genre, period, author, or place of origin, takes the form of the initiation story—i.e., the fundamental and powerful concept for American Literature.

Thus, we relate Mason's story to the initiation story, and a good controlling question (just as the course has a controlling question, so each class session should have a controlling question) at the start of the "Shiloh" class is "Whose initiation story is it?" Or you might ask in what arena does the initiation take place—e.g., religion, gender, culture? Afterwards, you could tie to the story's two already-introduced fundamental and powerful concepts. For example, you might review previous stories in which the Southern Gothic has appeared, such as those of O'Connor, Faulkner, or even Chopin. You could be more particular and ask if your students see any Gothic traits in "Shiloh." Then you could do the same thing with minimalism. One of the connections we like to draw is between the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realistic convention of verisimilitude (the avalanche of small details in order to create the illusion of reality) and Mason's use of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century convention of brand name realism (e.g., Body Buddies, Pepsi).

**Iterate!** When we first got into teaching, we ran across an interesting article on advertising, whose gist was that in order for the public to develop product awareness, the realization that a product (especially a new one) is out there, that product needs six iterations, whether they are product give-aways, TV jingles, radio ads, billboards, etc. You may not hit on your new concept six times in one class, but whether you are doing PowerPoints, writing on the board, Q and A-ing, Socratic questioning, group work, or writing exercises, make a point to repeat the key ideas.

One technique Nosich recommends to achieve active learning and individual clarity of concept is SEE-I, or what we have mnemonically taught our students as the **SEE-ing I**. When you begin a new concept such as minimalism, take time to have each student State on paper his/her definition, Elaborate on it with a paraphrasing sentence that begins with "In other words . . .," Exemplify it with a sentence starting "For example . . .," and Illustrate it with a sentence beginning "It's like . . ." If you have time, you can have members of the class share aloud their various definitions, elaborations, examples, and illustrations. With minimalism, we like to start with the cross-disciplinary notion that it signifies "Less is more" and try to get examples from other courses, such as interior design and art. You could facilitate deeper learning by having students pair and share.

Another excellent form of iteration is moving students up the revised Bloom's taxonomy. Have them apply the convention of the Gothic mansion to the various abodes in Mason's story such as Leroy's rig in the yard, their trailer, or the cabin at the Shiloh battlefield, analyze the conventions that do not appear in the story (especially the replacement of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century stereotypic characters with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century grotesque, the character with the consuming monomania), evaluate several possible meanings of the final image of Norma Jean on the promontory above the Tennessee River, and create an interpretation that takes into account conflicting viewpoints about the seeming gender reversal of the Moffitts.

Don't forget that if you are conditioning your students through these active learning approaches, design your assessments—tests, papers, oral reports, and exams—to reflect this classroom approach. Multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests and encyclopedic-entry-like papers run counter to the learning strategies you have been promoting.

**Summarize!** No matter how well or how poorly the class is going, or whether you are using one of the above-mentioned teaching strategies, pause approximately five minutes before the class ends. Try to sum up using both yours and the class' input on those major concepts. If possible, try to synthesize, perhaps showing how the concepts are related or by combining the concept with a related part of the story. Maybe you give a quiz on the concepts, maybe you ask if your students have any follow-up questions, or maybe you have them write short paragraphs about the concepts.

Summaries that marry the particular with the general make a long-lasting impression. For instance, to reinforce the fundamental concept of the Southern Gothic, you might emphasize the convention of place, and ask for a list of Mason's images of the South. With specifics like the "expensive subdivisions in a new white-columned brick house that looks like a funeral parlor" (4), the subdivisions "spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick" (3), and the Shiloh battlefield, you can then ask your students what these things have in common; the repeated images of death obviously lead to the conclusion that the Southern Gothic is all about decay in Dixie. With minimalism, you could note that while the focal point of the story is on Leroy (the story begins and ends with him observing Norma Jean), the sparse details provide her with a mother, who helps explain Norma Jean's motivation to escape the traditional role of the Southern woman, but Mason has no family members for Leroy. Why? Does that omission help to make him more of a stereotype because his actions are given less motive?

You do not have to answer every question brought up in class, as the old Vaudeville axiom of leaving them wanting more certainly applies to the classroom. In fact, some of the posed but unanswered questions provide excellent starting points for test questions.

**Preview!** Before your students make that lemming-like lurch for the exit, resist that temptation to wish your students a happy weekend or to answer that vibrating cellphone. Instead, point your class in a specific direction you will be heading next period. Try to tie that new direction into something you have just gone over—i.e., provide them with the direction and opportunity to tie previous learning to the homework experience. We usually give our students something specific to look for in the upcoming work. There's a reason that the entertainment industry is constantly offering previews to an upcoming movie, new CD release, or what's happening next week on *Grey's Anatomy*.

You might say, for example, "As you know 'sampling' is a rap concept wherein the rapper interfuses his song with lyrics, tunes, or rhythms from previous artists. Next class we'll be reading the late, great Raymond Carver. In 'Cathedral' I want you to see if you find moments when Carver seems to be 'influenced' by Papa Hemingway, and afterwards I want you to write a one-sentence thesis statement about Hemingway's style as a possible influence on the minimalist school." Focusing on a detail that is

placed in a larger context (the marriage of the general and the specific again) is a good way to promote both reading for detail and higher-order thinking.

### Conclusion

If you follow the C.R.I.S.P. approach and wish to help students organize the material and hence learn more deeply, don't stray from the pattern in your assessment activities. Make sure your test questions are not mere regurgitations of classroom materials. Here's an easy way to avoid that error with tests. Give your students passages they have never before seen, and ask questions such as "Does the passage seem like it's from one of Mason's Southern Gothic/minimalistic stories?" Basically, you are asking your students to synthesize what they have learned about the writer and these fundamental concepts, and analyze the stories by applying the new knowledge. Most importantly, you are asking them to demonstrate mastery of a pattern that you have been showing them in previous weeks.

When food is crisp, it's more inviting and digestible. When your class is C.R.I.S.P., your students more eagerly anticipate the learning experience, and deep learning is more apt to occur.

### Works Cited

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