**Sample Student-to-Student Written Feedback**

**English 5331**

**Spring 2014**

**Graduate Fiction Workshop**

**Note: The vast majority of feedback in the workshop is provided orally during class, as is standard with this particular model.**

**Story #1**

Student #1

You have an incredible ability to bring life to text through incredibly accurate, oft-times humorously twisted, details. The taste of reality is so strong at times, it’s hard not to go and think about all the times I've seen evidence of the things you described. The self-absorbed nature of many gamers, who always taute their own accomplishments regardless of what others do, almost blind to the fact that few, if anyone, cares. Chunky peanut butter in between the teeth? Oh, the discomfort.

Is there conflict in the story? You know that's a discussion that's coming. I think it’s definitely present. You have all the minor conflicts that appear in everyday life that help us understand why Mark wants to escape games, even though it’s a bit of interaction filled with some rather unsavory types that are just as selfish, demanding, and empty as the people he encounters in the store. The whole thing with the carts and the car, I could totally believe it just like I'd seen it. The old lady? Could see it. Only the death scene felt artificial. The manager? Fuck, everyone who has lived in Texas very long has met that man and KNOWS to believe that scene and they all create that sort of conflict that can be believed. Is it critical conflict, no. Is there something to be lost? Yes. Of course I don't think some readers will be able to necessarily understand what is at stake. It’s not death, it’s not love, it’s not anything critical like that. Its escape and something that gives pride. That's what’s at stake. The realization of the fleeting nature of life though does begin to change Mark, at least in the moment. That's something I really wanted to look at a bit more.

We bring up questions of meaning, relative importance, reality, life, death, and cultural values all into a piece that is just plain fun.

Christine just kind of came and went. Why was she even there besides as more background detail?

By far one of my favorite stories, I still must beg the question "Why the death scene?" Is there any less scripted way to create the questions you want to ask? Everything else is so natural that the scene artificiality is plain. You want it to be powerful, not something the reader needs to get through. Is there some other way you could create such questions, to make Mark a witness to the end of life in some way that doesn't feel like that?

Student #2

I would remark that the story seems disjointed however I am bound to be told later that it is not because of some ever-tightening narrative string later in class. But as of now, it seems to be the ultimate disjointed text, because, video games are in a sense disjoining, and reality-separating entities, while chess is a very analog set of rhythms and demonstrations. The references continue to trouble the text: we have star wars and chess references, and though he’s only sixteen that is old in gifted chess players territory. The lack of demonstrative action leads to a greater importance being put on the old lady’s death, even though, her performance in the story doesn’t make one long for her to live. One can talk about the on-line/off-line binary, the youth, aged storyline, the references to death in a society which primarily responds to the hyperreal, and the significance of lack of significance, et cetera, et cetera; but I find myself wondering what intrigue can be found in this town of his. Whatever town that may be. In a sense the problem with all these intelligent children in provincial setting stories is that you lose faith in setting (in millieu) which should be on the face of it as interesting as the rest of the story. This is why many writers were in awe of their settings. Why writers have loved Dublin and Paris and New York, but why writers also love desolate planes and river-bound grotesques—because if they didn’t find it interesting no one would.

Student #3

Mark is a high school student who lives in a small town with rich parents and enjoys playing wartime video games (first person shooters). It appears he is attracted to the position of power the game enables him to be in, one that forces him to command his troops (friends) and achieve victory. At school he is alienated because of his family’s wealth, and at work, due in part to his lowly position at a retail store, he often deals with unruly customers and a self-absorbed boss. The game allows him to experience some sort of control that he lacks in his real life. One day in the store, an old woman dies. Here, Mark and his manager are stripped of any control, which Mark will reflect back on in the end when he dies in the game under the command of one of his friends. I think the ending is supposed to show how that even the video games aren’t fun for Mark when he isn’t in command. It is the control that attracts him to them, which is why when he dies because of Troy, he doesn’t mind going in to work; both places force him to be just a “pawn”.

It’s pretty ironic that Mark’s people skills and calm attitude are what get him and his crew through the opening battle, but it’s a lack of those real-world skills that cause him the most stress. All of his knowledge seems to be bookish and based on logic rather than on the unpredictability of people and life

Throughout the story, I kept waiting for the notion of sacrifice that’s established with the opening combat scene to show up again in a different form. Mark had to make an insignificant one with the virtual death of one friend to win the battle, but what’s the larger sacrifice he’ll make to add symbolic weight to that scene?

Student #4

I think this story is about an average joe, a teenager with common teenager problems and a couple unique twists, i.e. he's super tall. Mark appears to have disengaged and seemingly negligent parents, which the story intentionally avoids, much like Mark. He also resents his hourly part-time job at Kroger, but then, who doesn't. And Mark is a "gamer," a person who spends blocks of time playing games, and plans to do so ahead of time, having game-dates with his friends, a common thing nowadays for pretty much everybody.

The story recounts the details of one night, one work-day, and a Saturday. In this time, Mark plays a FPS, goes to work, is yelled at by an old bitty, is subsequently yelled at by an old redneck, finds the old lady dead, watches an ambulance and EMT's, and then plays a FPS again, and wishes he was back at work.

It seems that Mark is troubled with self-esteem, like most boys, and longs for significance and affirmation more than anything. I think this is at first, available to him in his game more so than at work, hence the beginning of the story's emphasis, via Mark's pleasure, on the one over the other. Yet Mark is faced with a real-life, death scenario at work, causing him to have a more significant experience at work, hence the transformation at the end of the story. However, we do not know, since we are not told, what Marks' motivation is for having such a transformation. I think he was inspired by the medics, yet I don't know. He very easily could also be a selfish brat who doesn't like playing when he isn't the platoon leader (we all know those guys).

Student #5

This is a story about a teenager named Mark, who fancies himself a great leader of men because he is good at directing virtual soldiers in an online game. He has read all sorts of theory about troop motivation and war-craft, and he understands the importance of maintaining the morale of his virtual troops. I had a good laugh when I figured out that it was not a real battle scenario that was being relayed by the third-person narrator, but a virtual one. The headset cable coming loose from the Xbox was a stroke of genius, in my opinion. Though the game is almost disastrously compromised due to the headset issue, Mark manages to save the situation for his team by sacrificing one of his men, and this is the first iteration of the phrase that plays through the piece, “The dead don’t speak,” because “Dead players weren’t allowed to speak to the living.”

Following the game, Mark spends time thinking about which players he should sacrifice first in the next round of the game. Meanwhile his parents come home, and we learn that because Mark comes from a more affluent family than some of the other kids at school, he is something of a social misfit in the small farming community he lives in. He considers him superior to the other kids.

At this point, the scene shifts and we find Mark wearing a sign around his neck that says “bird man” as he drags a ladder around the supermarket where he works trying to catch a bird that poops on the merchandise and sometimes on the customers. While Mark is involved in this somewhat humiliating task, he is harassed by a little old lady who decides to report him for being rude, though he really hasn’t done anything wrong.

The dayshift manager, Vince, is the antithesis of everything Mark wants to become when he finally finishes school and escapes from the confines of his small town, but as Mark comes to realize, people in the real world are more complicated than they appear. When the little old lady croaks while waiting for Vince to happen by, she is discovered by Mark, who, though he sets the wheels in motion by shouting for help and for someone to dial 911, is unsure what to do next. At this point Vince steps in with quiet authority and organizes his team of workers putting them to work and keeping order while he performs CPR on the old lady who cannot speak because she is probably dead.

I think the story shows a young man coming of age. In the final scene, Mark sacrifices his own character to save his team in the video game, then decides to go into work with Vince, though he had refused Vince’s repeated requests to work that Saturday because of the big video tournament.

Well done. I got a kick out of this story, and I thought you did a good job of showing Mark’s desires and shifting motivations.

Student #6

This story is about a high school aged boy, Mark, who loves math and gaming. The story opens in the midst of an online group game which we later find out is part of a tournament that Mark and his team has entered. During the game, readers learn that Mark has an innate ability to plan attacks and maneuver players into prime locations and engagements in order to ensure a win. The bulk of the remaining story takes place at Kroger, where Mark works. Through his activities at Kroger, we learn that Mark does not play school team sports, although he did tryout for the basketball team. He has an uncanny ability to get into messes that are either minor and simply annoying or have nothing at all to do with him. While at work, he offends an elderly woman by using the word “poop” when explaining why he is the “birdman”. The woman later dies while waiting to report his offensive behavior to the manager, Vincent. Shortly after, a hunter blames Mark for damage done to his truck even though the damage was actually done by a rogue cart. Mark is also infatuated with one of the blond cashiers.

Character

Mark, the main character, is smart and knows it. That he knows about his superior intellect is ironic since during the opening game he makes a note of the teammates that pat themselves on the back for their level of play and then comments that such arrogance should be rewarded by early sacrifice during a future game. Mark is tall and lanky having a basketball player’s body-type and he has acned skin. He likes girls, but only admires them from afar and fanaticizes about them enjoying gaming as much as he.

Vincent, Marks manager at Kroger, is an imposing figure and uses sly manipulation to get his employees to do what he wants them to do. Specifically, he first questions Mark about his participation in sports and such before requesting that he work an early Saturday morning shift. By the time he got to the actual request, Vincent had eliminated most of the reasons/excuses that Mark may pose for not working the shift.

Development

The beginning of this story is a strong anecdotal scene that mimics a military battle. The reader is surprised to find out that the scene is actually online video game play. I think is particularly strong. However, I would have liked to see it as a memory of a military person, perhaps even one in the midst of a war. As it stands, Marks story progressively slows until the end. Although I learned much about his character and personality, I’m not sure what story he wanted me to hear.

Mark is an interesting character, and I’m interested to see where his story goes from here.

Student #7

The story is about games. Mark, the protagonist and squad leader, commands Kevin, Raul, Troy, and Scott in war games. At Kroger’s, where he works, Mark has a boss named Vincent, has an interest in the cashier, Christine, and has to deal with an old lady and a fat driver whose car is dinged by a cart.

The setting moves with the action. The first scene is the squad-level firefight of an Xbox game. Mark is in command, an effective strategist willing to sacrifice men to win the battle. He takes an obvious pride in his leadership and jealously guards it against potential competition from Troy. After the game ends, he reviews it to determine each player’s strengths and weaknesses to command the unit to the best advantage. After the game ends, the scene widens to show Mark at home with the parents coming back from Whiskey Night. The scene gives the reader a broader view of a rural town with Mark’s discordantly prosperous family but leaves with unanswered questions. His relations with the country boys is tenuous. The group that he plays with and dominates seems like the lower part of the school’s pecking order. The bullying about his father not being able to satisfy his mother is left unresolved. He can’t defend himself, and must go the fantasy of games to redeem his honor.

The next scene takes place in Kroger’s where Mark works. Many of the same conflict elements occur, the ineffective position of the bird catcher, confrontation by a conflicting force (the parking lot incident), and death (the old woman). He plays a passive non-command role, leaving the action to Vincent.

The last scene occurs the following morning at Mark’s house where he sits on his bed playing the war game, but this time with Troy in command. Mark joins the game and is killed quickly, but enjoys watching his rival doing a poor job of commanding the same players he had last commanded. He remembers the old woman and feels that he is ready to work in Kroger’s again. The game is leading him toward acceptance of everyday challenges.

The theme is a person’s role as a leader in life, first in a game, and then in real life. That immediately questions the development of leadership skills during the high school years and the ability to apply them in real life.

The language is standard, the use of dialog good, and the narration for summation well placed. The brief description of the family and Mark’s relation to the new school could be fleshed out more. He doesn’t want to meet them when they come in from Whiskey Wednesday. Why? Do we have a drinking problem here? Or is he overpowered by parents who are over-solicitous or controlling? Or are they so rich, famous, and generally superior to him that he feels he will never live up to expectations? This all has bearing on his development which seems a bit underdeveloped at this point.

Student #8

This story opens with Mark leading his group of men in combat. By the end of the first page, though, we learn that Mark is playing a video game with remote communication with his friends. Mark is a good leader; he knows the value of morale among his crew and also sacrifices a soldier in his strategy to win the game. Mark’s parents arrive home from their friends’ house, but Mark goes to his room before they come in. For some reason, though, it is significant that they drive a BMW, which sets them apart from other parents in the rural, Midwestern town.

Mark works at a Kroger’s grocery store. He has been assigned as the “bird man” to locate and trap a bird flying inside the store. An old woman sees him and asks him questions. She accuses him of swearing when he uses the word ”poop” and sits down to wait for the manager so she can complain. Mark heads to the back of the store to use the restroom and encounters Vince, the manager. Vince asks him if he’s involved in sports, with the intent to determine if Mark is available to work on Saturday before Mark can turn him down. Mark has a video game competition with his crew but lies and says he has a reservation for paintball. Vince schedules Mark to work Saturday anyway. While he is collecting shopping carts outside, Mark encounters a bearded man who accuses him of hitting his truck with a cart. When Mark heads inside to find Vince and tell him about this irate man, he sees the old woman sitting in the same place she was earlier. When he speaks to her, she doesn’t respond, and Mark alerts Vince and others to get help. Someone calls 911, Vince performs CPR on the woman, and an ambulance comes. Mark goes out to meet the ambulance and watches as they take the woman away. Mark also sees the bearded man from earlier, but his significance is unknown.

The next day, Mark tells Vince he can’t work, but even though he participates in the game with his friends, he doesn’t lead the team. His character dies, he’s not allowed to speak to his friends, and he considers going in to work.

Mark is the main character. He cares a lot about his role as a leader to his friends in their video game competition. He apparently has even read military history books to bolster his strategy and skill. He wants his team to win the competition and is willing to quit his job to make sure he’s available for it. He doesn’t really want to lose his job, though, and tries to avoid trouble. Mark expects that, unlike others his age in this town, he will probably go to college and create a better life than what those in this town have. He thinks of himself as better than others. Mark seems to be in awe of the whole situation with the old woman’s medical emergency, but we don’t really get his feelings, only his thoughts and observations. It seems that the event affected him strongly because he doesn’t lead his team in the video game competition, but we don’t get any specifics about this.

I feel like there is supposed to be a connection between Mark’s prowess in the video game and his relative lack of action during the woman’s emergency, but it’s still murky for me. I’m also wondering about the title. Is there supposed to be a connection between the players not speaking if they are “dead” and the old woman? We don’t actually know that the woman is dead, so this further complicates such a connection.

Student #9

Language: When I first started reading this, I really thought I was about to read a story about an incident in the war. I was really surprised when I realized it was a teenage boy playing a video game. The language and mention of the history and war books brought the story a deeper element. Even though it was just a video game, it was clear that it was truly important to Mike and even showed he had something deeper within him. That he really wasn’t just like the other kids in the town.

Setting: The story takes place in Mike’s home and workplace, Kroger, in a small Midwest town. The sports references and everyone driving a truck keep this image intact. My only question is whether or not there are Krogers in the Midwest.

Characters: The central character is a teenage boy named Mike. He is both intelligent and commanding but is also very shy and unsure of himself. He fears ending up stuck in his current small town. He seems to have a talent for tactical play with his friends, but lacks that authority in real life situations. His manager, Vince, seems like your typical pretend-to-be-nice managers. It’s not that he’s bad, but he does have a grandiose image of himself.

Theme/plot: I think the theme to this story involves Mike’s discovery of the difference between real life and games, especially in regards to death. Before the incident with the elderly woman in the story, Mike couldn’t wait to get away from work to play his tournament game with his friends. He saw that as a responsibility. When he actually began to play the next day, he seemed as if he really wasn’t interested in it anymore. The story ends with him contemplating calling his boss and requesting to come in. It seems as if he has experienced a death of adolescence and is ready to move onto to something else in life, though we don’t know what. The only thing I would add to the story is some ambition in Mike. He shows he has a natural talent for tactics and is great with math and acknowledges that he isn’t like everyone is this town and doesn’t want to end up like Vince, but doesn’t mention anything he would like to end up doing.

Student #10

Mark is a sixteen-year-old boy who works at the local Kroger and plays on-line video games with his high school pals. The story opens with Mark leading a squad through a firefight in one such on-line game. In a previous generation, Mark, who speaks “fluent math,” would have been a chess prodigy, thinking steps ahead, factoring in personalities and probabilities. Beyond the on-line world, Mark is tall but not athletic enough to make the basketball team. Girls are definitely on his radar, but his fantasies have as yet only extended to girls joining in the on-line gaming. Even in reality, Mark sees the girls as red-shirts in an episode of *Star Trek*. While he is a squad leader on-line, he is a foot soldier at the grocery store. His encounters with the elderly lady, his manager Vince, and the blustery guy with the dinged truck are all filtered through Mark’s calculating chess-playing mind. When he knows he cannot win, he does not speak. The exchange with Vince is set in contrast to the opening firefight except that Vince is something of a chess player too. Mark “could see himself in Vincent.” Mark knows he has a shot at escaping the inertia of the small town, but he also knows it is not a sure thing, that Vince has not escaped.

Mark’s job is to do the grunt work of the grocery store – catching birds, bagging groceries, and rounding up grocery carts. His shift proceeds uneventfully, that is, filled with unevents such as being harassed by first a little old lady who objects to his perfectly innocent use of the word “poop” and then a porky little guy in a camouflage jacket who is convinced Mark has rammed his truck with a grocery cart. These unevents fall away when the little old lady keels over right under Mark’s nose.

The rush of events from that point further highlights the direct correlation between Mark and Vincent, the contrast between games and uneventful life, the traits of leadership and how those traits are deployed. The old lady’s immanent death and Vince’s commitment to the old lady, as if she too were part of his team, seem to have an effect upon Mark: the story ends on that greatly-contested Saturday with Mark observing the video-game gun-battle rather than participating, his detachment in counterpoint to his immersion in the video-battle in the story’s opening scene. Mark joins in just long enough to achieve virtual martyrdom. Mark’s video-warrior death is both the work of a team player and his renunciation of his on-line existence in favor of his off-line existence, an act of solidarity with the old lady as much as with Vince and the cashiers.

I know that these kinds of epiphanies are not unusual in fiction and not unusual in life, but I thought this was tidily rendered and that Mark’s incremental growth was well charted. Reaching for something to suggest, I wonder if the scene with the porky little guy with the dented truck could be developed, not necessarily into anything larger or more significant but into something that seems more of a piece with the rest of the story. The danger there would be that it might appear to be over-determined whereas, as it stands, it could simply be one of life’s frayed edges.

Student #11

Mark and his friends are high intensity gamers and is currently involved in some type of tournament. Mark conducts himself and is perceived as being a sort of squad leader within the game. He does not seem to have a strong relationship with his parents who are image obsessed (BMW) and have frequent drinking habits (Whiskey Wednesday). Mark works at a grocery store and is trying to catch a bird who has gotten stuck inside. An older woman accuses him of foul language and demands to speak with his supervisor and sits and waits by the door. Mark runs into his supervisor on the way to the bathroom and Vincent tries to convince Mark to cover the Saturday shift. Mark makes lame excuses. Then, while in the parking lot, Mark is accused of denting another’s man truck. Then, when he leaves to take a picture of the ding, Mark uses the opportunity to run back inside. The little gray-haired woman is still sitting by the door and Mark believes he can make amends by helping take her groceries to her car but she is dead! Vincent starts CPR and an ambulance is called. Mark calls in the next day and claims that he is distraught over the death of the old woman but, in actuality, he is playing video games and they are losing badly. He ends up sacrificing his character and contemplates going to work.

I thought the opening scene was a legit battle until Mark’s headphones got unplugged. He is so assertive during this scene and willing to sacrifice others for the success of the mission. It is interesting to see this side of Mark compared to his real life working at the grocery store. He is less vocal and a bit of an outcast, always retreating to the safety of the restroom. There is a dramatic shift from the beginning and end concerning his role and video games. Why does Mark relinquish control on his leadership role at the end? Wasn’t that the reason he fought so hard to get off work? And why does he sacrifice himself? Does he no longer care about the semi-finals? The woman’s death seems to have had an effect on him but I guess I am unsure how.

That being said, I feel like I am supposed to relate the gray-haired women’s death with the deaths/sacrifices in the video games and yet I do not see the immediate connection. Has death become more real? Has the game lost its luster, now having experienced death in real life? Mark is very stoic and it is hard to get inside his head.

This story has great potential! The scenes are very realistic and I could see them happening. However, I would suggest providing more insight into Mark’s character. He seems to have undergone a complete transformation, especially, as seen with his role and video gaming, but I am still unsure how. I would suggest being more direct but then I wouldn’t say that’s necessarily true or needed.

**Story #2**

Let Me Walk You to the Door is a 3rd Person Point of view story that primarily follows Pete, Mia and Kat (the second character in this batch of stories to have the name, but bears little to no resemblance to the other) through an emotional journey. Well, technically Kat has already made her way through the emotional issue and done away with the little beastie that is apparently the physical representation of the emotional baggage.

I wasn’t sure what to make of the little critters the first time we met them. I thought maybe that they were a figment of Pete’s imagination, a symptom of insanity, or even a Battlestar Galactica-esque manifestation (long story if you don’t know the series), but I as things went by and other characters reacted to them (while some didn’t) I realized that this may be more of a phenomenon than a simple mental issue. This reassured me and allowed me to have much more fun on the second reading. By the end of that reading, the critters really stole the show, particularly that last scene where Pete refuses to resolve his issues (Colto and the daughter: yes that is kind of difficult to deal with) and his little monster makes itself right at home. Of course, I was also pleased to know the monsters would never go away, but would always return to remind them “who we really are when we feel the most uncertain or lost.”

The interaction between Mia and Kat is one of the most important and emotionally engaging in the story. On the other side, I find it difficult to invest in (though not to believe in) the character of Pete. This wasn’t as big of an issue once the creatures began to appear as the lack of interesting traits he displays are more that made up for by it. “He was primping his fleshy wings like a woman would fix her hair.” Little details that are humorous, that are fun to picture this thing doing, make scenes that would be dry more engaging.

This is a refreshing, fun piece that helped make my weekend a good one, with more of a traditional moral message that tends to me missing in a lot of newer fiction I've come across.

Student #2

I guess this is vexation week, because color me vexed. You have a certain Kafkaesque quality to your writing. There is indeed an intense connection between individualism being crushed by society, nature being crushed by bureaucracies and its supernatural qualities. The first scene comes across the strongest, perhaps because it is the most perplexing—why betta fish are swimming at the bottom of the “stripper, clear heels,” but I kept returning wondering if I was misreading it. Where is the betta fish? From where have come the sequins, and what to make of the word “stripper.” I imagine the wife here, Kat (with a K) is staying at home, but from the opening moment I thought she was a prostitute, perhaps for women. (I don’t know why but I kept thinking about Concussion.) But the longer the story lingers (which is sort of what it does, it lingers) the story becomes less realist and more fantasist, and that’s what you are Olivia, a fantasist, which makes sense. Your references to Rapunzel and Peter Pan couldn’t be more obvious—the story is fantastical, to refer to another story of the fantastic from another era is putting too much weight on your connections to a storytelling tradition.

The time that this story takes place in is also up for grabs. Sometime where we actually trade with Nicaragua for Tarantulas (which I think or native to the U.S. as well) and a good job is working for a country club—I never noticed people worked for Country Clubs, but I guess that says a lot about me. Perhaps I suspect that the people who work at Country Clubs are young people and not fathers of teenage daughters. And while we’re on that subject, when he hollered (he must have because there was an exclamation point) that his daughter is in high school, I shrugged. So what if she was in high school. I didn’t quite understand the age difference. How much is the age difference? Even though I did sort of get the feeling that she was the kind of girl, who dated men very much older than her, the type of twelve year-old already drawing the eye of high schoolers, and by the time in high school dating twentysomethings. Perhaps that was just me reading into the story, or perhaps I was right to read into it a pervading sense of sexuality. (Magic sequence collecting in the cups of bras, anyone?)

And I imagine I shouldn’t be asking this question; it’s a question I disdain asking or getting, and when I accept Alec’s story so freely, it’s even worse but I can’t help feeling: what is this about? What are the little men? What is that little troll other than a *demon*. One imagines there’s still arguments about the translation of what large beetle (or cockroach) exited in Kafka’s Metamorphosis, so to ask for more specifics may be not only impolite but a failure to understand. The point may be in fact, its own fantasticalness—its own specific eeriness.

Student #3

This story opens with a seemingly awkward situation: There is a third person (creature) in bed with Pete and his wife. Pete’s children, Wayland (5 yrs old) and Mia (teenager in high school), don’t seem disturbed at all by this extra presence in their home. The insinuation is that the trio was partying the night before. It is morning, and Mia is just concerned with getting to cross-country practice on time.

Kat, Pete’s wife, has creatures appear each day into her life. All she has to do to get them to leave is show them the door, but before doing so, they stay for a while. Pete has tolerated these creatures as part of his wife’s life, but he didn’t know these creatures showed up for anyone else until a woman comes into the country club where he works with a creature hanging on her back.

One day, Mia arrives with a creature of her own. Kat says that there must be a boy involved. Kat tells Mia that the creature won’t go away until Mia comes to terms with herself. After a week, Kat finally tells Mia that she only needs to show the creature the door. If it’s really that simple, then I’m not sure why Kat didn’t tell Mia this sooner.

Pete sees from Mia’s phone that Colton, with whom he works at the country club, has called Mia. This upsets Pete. Now, he has his own creature haunting him with whom he is playing cards.

This story is a creative way to illustrate the concept that everyone has demons that haunt him or her. Even though getting rid of them is as simple as showing them the door, the characters keep their demons around for a while, just as we tend to stew over problems for a while before we are ready to release them.

Student #4

This story describes a world in which the worries and problems a person carries around actually manifest physically in the form of demons or monsters. The story is told in third person limited point of view through the eyes of Pete. Pete is married to Kat, who is plagued by demons. The first such creature we meet is a sequin encrusted, blue-haired stripper with dead fish in her shoes. The real oddity of the situation becomes apparent when the children, Mia and Wayland, act as if nothing is amiss when they wander into their parents’ bedroom and find this stripper in bed with their parents. As Kat gets up and gets going, she shows the creature to the door, which we later learn, is her way of getting rid of her demons.

Pete is troubled by Kat’s demons but doesn’t understand where they come from. He has only ever seen them around his wife, who has always had them around her. Presumably she is just a person who is prone to worrying? This part is not explained, and I think there is an opportunity there to clarify why Kat has always had demons around her but Pete has never understood them. Pete sees the first person outside his home to have an attendant demon while he is at work one day. A lady golfer named Mirabella shows up with a monkey-like thing hanging on her back. Pete discusses his concerns with Colton, though he never comes right out and tells Colton what his concerns are.

The whole thing becomes clear at last when Pete and Kat’s daughter Mia manifests a demon. It transpires that Mia is seeing Colton, who we now learn Pete thinks is an idiot. The worries that brought the demon into being, Kat tells Mia must have come from a boy. I wonder about the implications here. What exactly is worrying Mia? What worries Kat so much that she manifests demons daily? In the end, Pete’s anger over Mia seeing Colton causes HIM to manifest a demon. That one I understood the reason for.

I thought this was a very clever premise at work, and I thought the author’s descriptive voice was strong. I noted some confusion, however, about whether the demons were hes, shes, or its.

Student #5

The opening scene, which is repeated, with the blue betta fish inside the wet heels inspires some sort of weird sexual energy that festers for the entire story. I kept waiting for some sort of explosive climax involving a deranged sex scene with the creatures and Kat, or death by the hands of the creatures or Pete. Calling them “creatures” is a little adolescent; is there a better word you could use? In fact, I’m not completely sure what the audience for this story is. If I had to guess, I’d say Jr. High or early High School. If that’s the case, I’d like the humor to be put at the forefront and expanded upon, if not, the darker, gothic elements of the story need to be drawn out. Funniest line: “Oh my gosh! It was just a spider. People eat them all the time.” Cussing might be better fitted for a demon. Darkest description: “A long, skeleton-like figure with featherless wings was placing china on the table.” While the contrast is effective, a more focused approach on either element would enhance the imagery.

The title is a little weak considering the fantastical content within. I’d like a title more specific to the emotions and/or creatures present.

What was with the spider? It definitely adds to the creep element here, but I’m not sure if it has a purpose other than that. Does the fact that they’re consuming it have significance? I want these speculative aspects to be connected to literary ones instead of just adding to the mystique and plot.

There was one line that took me immediately out of the story: “What I mean, man, is that everyone has their demons.” This is too direct and could be considered an insult to your reader’s intelligence.

Creatures appear to control the direction within the story: everything that happens involves them and their disrupting qualities in some way. I would be more interested in a more aggressive main character, one that could change his future and the problems around him rather than accepting the strange cause(s) of his and his world’s discomfort.

Student #6

This story is about Pete, a husband and father of two, who lives in a world where one's demons are visible, though perhaps only to him as and his family. The main plotline seems to be that Pete is a decent man without a lot of anger issues, but with the stress of dealing with his wife's demons (literally) (and eating tarantula?) and disobedient children, Pete develops his own demon. All this as the parents try to teach the daughter how to deal with her own demon.

We see Pete in his daily life from a mysterious scene of him and his wife awakening—demon present—to his life at work with a clueless stoner. The main conflict appears to be Pete's developing anger and problems over his wife's inability to get rid of her demon. To his children, he seems very understanding, but perhaps he is affected by others more than he thinks and ends up playing Go Fish with his personal hobgoblin by the end of the story.

The writing itself is solid, with some good descriptions. There are times that a pronoun is not clear or a description seems to be missing just a little more information to make it clear to the reader. One such line was: "It then used one of its fangs as a sort of bizarre toothpick." In this case, I'm unsure if "its fangs" refers back to "It" (the demon) or references the spider. There were a few capitalization errors (marked) and commas needed (marked). Otherwise, the writing was very clear and open, easy to read.

The plot seems to be a moral "riches to rags" story, where Pete loses his good nature. The conflict, Pete wanting to help his wife, is a bit stagnant as there is no solution in sight. We are watching Pete suffer, basically, and we don't expect it to be fixed by the end. The main source of tension toward the end is that the daughter is dating a local scumbag against the parents' wishes. Previously, the conflict was Pete and the wife, so now it has changed focus to the daughter, who acts as a catalyst for the change in Pete. While this definitely makes sense, it also seems inorganic, in that it could have been added in anywhere, in anyway. I think the wife's source of tension should remain the conflict and that should be resolved (for better or worse). Perhaps the wife's demons start spreading to the children, so Pete begins fighting with her? He seems so much a team player and a perfectly devoted father/husband, I cannot see him doing anything but suffering without change.

I did like this story. I would like to see changes in the conflict and the source of tension needs to remain the same. Good job!

Student #7

The story is about a family haunted by demons summoned people within it. The conflict should be between the demons and the people, but the relationship appears to be helpful, at least early in the story. The tension is created by the question of what are they and what type of story this is. We are through a large part of the story before out that they are personifications of unresolved issues.

The characters are the husband Pete, the wife Kat, and the two kids, five-year-old Wayland, and Mia who runs cross-country. Colton is at the country club. But creatures appear—an unnamed power and sex person called the Alaskan princess in bed with the couple, a hairless dinner-server and guest, both summoned by the wife. One later joins Mia and yet another harnesses Pete. The reaction of the children is notable. Neither is disturbed by the mess the creatures make. Wayland even plays bulldozing sequins into piles in the beginning scene.

The setting is in the family house and briefly at the country club sometime in some alternative future, but close to the present. Fruit-loops, Legos, and Progresso soup make it very current. The tarantula meal is unique and adds an exotic flavor but competes with some very docile demons for the reader’s attention.

The action takes place over several days. The first demon appears in the very first scene but is replaced by another by dinnertime. At the golf course where Pete works, he sees a woman who is being badly badgered by hers. When a demon comes in with Mia, Pete asks her who the boyfriend is, but Mia won’t admit she has one. Pete answers Mia’s phone and finds out that the culprit is Colton, the not-too-sharp helper around the golf course. That creats the new demon. Pete’s worry about what to do with the kid—strangle him, shoot him, or just plain tell him he isn’t seeing Mia again—brings a demon for Pete. The closing scene ends with Pete and his demon playing cards.

The theme is simple enough: everybody has the demons of unresolved issues and it’s also simple enough to just resolve the issues to show them to the door and have the demons disappear.

The language is standard and uncomplicated by imagery or rhetorical gymnastics. The dialog is straightforward and amazingly bland for situations in which demons are trundling around the house setting the dishes and such. It is hard to make the case that they are only seen by the adults when they are handling real objects and have their own place set at the dinner table.

The basic thesis—that everybody has their own demons—is sound. The tension in the story is created by holding back the information about the origin of the demons. This could be augmented to add tension. First, they are physical in this fantasy, serving dishes, bothering people in public and other things. In real life, unsolved problems touch the whole family.

The demons and the other members of the household need to exhibit some form of visible conflict. The first to appearance of demons actually appear to be friendly, with the first appearing to be some form of lover for the wife and the second being a helpful servant. Who wants to get rid of helpers? This type of revision could darken the story, but it could also give the author an opportunity to play some demonic pranks. Humor often involves a painful situation and this should be no exception.

Student #9

Pete wakes in what appears to be the aftermath of a wild evening, he and his wife Kat sharing their bed with a blue-haired stripper from Alaska. Their little boy Wayland is playing in the hallway, using his toy truck to gather up the stripper’s sequins. Wayland has also repurposed the stripper’s pink bra as only a five-year old would. Their teenage daughter Mia is banging around the house in an uproar because she is about to miss cross-country practice . . . again.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Kat is visited by these demons--the stripper, a fey gargoyle--and that she has learned to escort them to the door and turn them loose once they have outstayed their welcome. During his day at work in the commisary of the local country club, Pete sees another woman with a monster on her back. Upon returning home, Pete finds his wife unattended by one of these creatures, but Mia bangs through the door with a monster of her own in tow.

The story depends upon a high-wire act: Pete and, it seems, Wayland can see these creatures. While Kat and Mia are aware of something, the reader is never certain exactly what the women perceive. We are never sure that the perceptions of Pete and Kat are exactly the same thing. Pete sees the stripper’s shoes; Kat hands the stripper her shoes as she is leaving. What Pete sees, Kat responds to, but Kat’s response could be some kind of metaphor.

Kat and Mia’s exchange late in the story is the high-wire act laid bare:

“Mom, how do I get rid of this thing?”

“When you come to terms with yourself.”

“I don’t understand and you won’t help me.”

“You have a responsibility and these *things* are a part of it that you must face.”

The stripperness and gargoyleness of Kat’s *things* are Pete’s perceptions. Wayland has not yet connected the winged creature setting the table with his mom. Even when Kat mentions Mia’s little friend following her around for the past week, it is unclear and unimportant whether she is refering to the creature or the manifestation of the creature that Pete sees. At the very end, the creature grows as Pete seethes.

The monsterness of the women’s emotional demons is handled deftly through Pete’s brooding and even Wayland’s uncomprehending glance at the winged thing setting the table. It would seem to be some kind of metaphor for men not knowing how to handle the emotional lives of women. Even if it isnt that, it is a wry comic expression of something akin to that.

The low-key normaler-than-normal life of the family (“pass the tarantula, honey”) is the perfect setting for these expressions of psyche (is that what they are?). The only clanking note is Mia’s involvement with Colton, the golf course flunky. Colton’s scene with Pete is solid and comic, and Colton’s sharing a bed with his dog and his stoner observation about everyone’s demons are nice light touches. While Mia’s monster is likely to be activated by a significant other, in this case an adolescent romance, an involvement with Colton doesn’t seem to add anything to the story. Having her involved with Colton makes the story-world seem insular and limited. Perhaps she could be involved with a kid who seems to Pete to be a Colton-in-the-works; the effect would be the same, and the story-world would not seem to be a budget production where they couldn’t hire one more character.

It seems that Mia’s involvement with Colton is meant to mirror her mom’s involvement with her dad. That would be dime-store stuff compared to relative complexity of the rest of the story. Mia’s monster jumps into action not because she is rebellious and having daddy issues but because she has emotional or sexual feelings for someone. Pete’s perceptions seem to be what fleshes out the monsters. His ability (?) to see his daughter’s demons should be that of a concerned father, a perplexed male: *any* boy should set Mia’s demons off. Pete will perceive *any* boy as a Colton-in-the-works with or without an attendant demon.

Student #10

Setting: The main setting is the family home. There is nothing about the home that stands out or feels vitally important. Because the subjects discussed are so out of the ordinary, it may be beneficial to add some “ordinary” descriptions to the house: meaning what the bed spread looked like, the kitchen, couch, table, ect. If the purpose is to show how different the house is, then the detail can be compounded here as well. The other place was the work space of Pete. Seems like an ordinary golf shop? Maybe a bit more detail of the place? Is his desk clean or chaotic?

Characters: Though its written in first person, I really feel like it is Pete’s account. He seems like an overly understanding husband and fairly reliable father, though at first I thought their child walked into a weird threesome. He says that his wife, Kat has been this way since he met her. Wouldn’t that have sent some kind of red flag that this was not going to be a normal relationship? He was sleeping in a chair while some crazy creature slept in the bed with his wife. I’m still not sure if there was a sexual element to that or not. As for Kat, why is she the one who has these visitors? Is it a curse she passed on to her daughter? Why aren’t the kids even remotely freaked out by this? If the creatures are slave to her, why does she keep them overnight to begin with? She seems like she likes them (the cook with and for her, sleep in her bed, help her make the bed) but her daughter most definitely detests having one follow her. I’m still not quite sure what the boy, Colton, has to do with Mia’s creature. The little brother seems to be the only one that is not plagued by the end of the story. Does this have something to do with his youth and innocence.

Theme: I took it to mean that everyone has their own demons following them around. Some we hold onto longer than others, some are more ugly than others, but above all, we are the ones in control over how much of our time we will let them have and how much of our life they are allowed to partake it. Kat explained that it was up to Mia to show them the door. Am I on the right track? Also, as Pete grew irate that Mia had a boyfriend, he seemed to develop his own creature or demon. His grew though. Why was his the only one that grew?

Language/plot: The language of this was very descriptive, mainly with the creatures. Even though their origin was unclear, their physicality was extremely perceivable. I was confused on one part. While Pete was at work, he saw a creature on a woman and this was the first time he had seen it outside of the house. Could anyone else see it?