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DEFINING “GOOD WRITING”:
A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The question of what constitutes “good writing” is an important one. As Xiao Li writes, a major part of composition instructors’ work involves enforcing standards of good writing by supplying written feedback to students about their work. According to Li, the most common view among composition instructors is that, on the one hand, recognition of good writing is based on intuition that almost defies articulation, but, on the other hand, there is nonetheless a “muted consensus” concerning what the criteria for good writing are. A less common view, Li writes, is that readers’ interactions with texts are so complex and idiosyncratic that it is virtually impossible to delineate criteria on which judgments about good writing can be based. Neither perspective, Li argues, is satisfactory because each leaves the status quo unquestioned and underanalyzed:

One of the most important functions of the teacher’s response to student writing is to offer text-specific advice, to communicate to the student-writer, in a subtle or straightforward manner, criteria for good writing. The abandonment of clear articulation and in-depth discussion of teachers’ criteria for good writing leaves the basis of this most demanding and probably most effective part of writing teachers’ job unexamined. (2)

Li’s work reports on a study of two Chinese and two US teachers’ reactions to six students’ essays. Teachers commented on the essays and discussed the other teachers’ comments with the researcher. Additionally, four of the essays were distributed to a larger group of teachers in both countries, and the teachers were asked to rank the four essays and to explain their rankings. The results led Li to posit that the criteria for “good writing” reside not just within the texts but also within teachers, and that teachers’

criteria “are shaped, transformed, and determined to a large extent by the historical, social, and cultural forces that are beyond an individual’s control” (2). Good writing, Li writes, is “a splice of multiple linguistic and non-linguistic, cultural and historical strands, of what is written in a piece and the manner in which the piece is written; of ideology and aesthetics; of society and individuals” (111).

Besides Li’s work, little research has investigated cross-cultural understanding of good writing by comparing teachers’ stated criteria for evaluation. The International Studies of Educational Achievement (IEA) Study of Written Composition (Gorman et al.) investigates writing education and performance in fourteen countries. However, while the IEA study provides contextual information about writing instruction in each of the fourteen contexts it investigates, the depth of investigation into each is necessarily limited because of the study’s breadth, and little information is provided about how teachers in each context evaluate writing.

One related study is Ilona Leki’s work, “Good Writing: I Know it When I See it.” While this study, conducted in the US, did not focus on cross-cultural understandings of “good writing,” her investigation is relevant because of its focus on teachers’ and students’ criteria for evaluating writing. Leki asked a group of university-level ESL students, writing teachers, and teachers of other subjects to read and rank a set of four essays written by ESL students and to explain their rankings. The student participants were asked to rank the essays three times: according to their own preference, what they thought their teachers would prefer, and what they thought teachers of other subjects would prefer. Results of the study indicated great variation in rankings; students did not predict well what rankings teachers might give, and teachers were not consistent among themselves. Additionally, the criteria used for ranking varied widely, and even when stated criteria were similar, rankings often differed. Leki concluded that “behind explicit standards of clear organization, appropriate vocabulary, effective introductions, and strong conclusions lie implicit understandings of those terms” (40), and that universal agreement on judgments of good writing is not likely to occur outside a specific context.

Further investigation into assumptions about good writing can be beneficial because notions of good writing, whether explicit or, more likely, implicit, have significant, concrete implications for students in writing programs: They influence formation of student placement and exit criteria for courses within programs; articulation of goals and development of curriculum; response to student writing; assignment of grades; and development of writing proficiency exams. Examining our own, local assumptions about “good writing” by juxtaposing them against those of another culture is especially important for writing specialists because it can help us understand in what ways our assumptions about writing are culture bound. This study, which compared evaluation criteria for writing held in two contexts, explores the criteria used to evaluate English-language writing by German and US secondary school teachers; additionally, it compares the rank ordering of three essays given by teachers from these three groups.

THE GYMNASIUM KRONSHAGEN

My research began with exploration of grading criteria for writing in English at the Gymnasium Kronshagen, a secondary school in Kronshagen, Germany, a suburb of the northern German city of Kiel in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Prior to this study, I had spent nine months in this school, investigating the teaching of first language (German) and second language (English) writing instruction. Since conducting this study, I have made two more research visits to this school. The German Gymnasium, a secondary school usually comprised of grades 5-13, is the most academically-oriented secondary school type in Germany’s three-tiered educational system. After finishing grades 1-4, German students receive non-binding recommendations from their teachers concerning whether they should attend a Hauptschule, a Realschule, or a Gymnasium. (Recently, students have also had the option of attending a Gesamtschule, a comprehensive secondary school which aims to bring students from different ability levels and socio-economic strata together.) Students who attend a Gymnasium must pass the Abitur, a series of written and oral exit exams taken at the end of the 13th grade, in order to enter a German university. The thirteenth grade of Gymnasium is often compared to the first year of US university education, especially because of the rigorous nature of Gymnasium-level education. Such a comparison is particularly appropriate in discussions of writing instruction since, like most European universities, German universities do not offer native language composition courses to first-year (or advanced) students; students are expected to enter the university already having the proficiency in German-language writing to undertake university study. (In fact, an explicit focus on German-language writing instruction is only considered appropriate through the ninth or tenth grade, at which point students are assumed to be proficient writers who can focus instead on the literary content of German classes. In English and other foreign language classes at the Gymnasium, students who choose English as one of their curricular emphases are also expected to be able to write proficiently in English by the eleventh grade, and thus to turn their attention to the content of their English courses, which involves interpretation of literary or other texts.)

At the Gymnasium Kronshagen, in grades five through nine of English, students write few long texts, focusing rather on developing their oral skills.
As students progress through the grades and approach the English Abitur, the importance of writing in English class increases. In grades 11-13 of English, students are expected to express themselves in writing as well as they can orally. The statewide curriculum guide for English indicates that the forms students write in grades 11-13 of English can include the following: note-taking, minutes, outline, summary, response, essay, story, report, letter, interview, definition, and description. However, the focus in grades 11-13 is on reading and writing about texts; students practice analysis of literary and, in some cases, non-literary texts (e.g., newspaper articles, transcripts of speeches) in preparation for the Abitur exit exam.

Students do not usually produce their “important” writing (that which is weighted heavily in final grades) according to a multi-draft, process approach. While students are sometimes assigned to write works at home and may be called on to read a work aloud in class, such writing is seen as practice for in-class written exams and is figured into students’ oral participation grades. Most of the graded writing is done in class under time pressure, and students are provided with a series of subquestions, which in essence provide the organization for their writing. Usually, the first question asks students to summarize the text, the following questions ask students to analyze the text in some way, often referring to literary devices they have learned about, and the final question asks them to give their own opinion about some aspect of the text. As prescribed by the curriculum guide for English, in the lower grades, teachers mark errors and assign holistic grades for students’ written work, while in the upper grades, a score for grammar is calculated by dividing the number of linguistic errors by the total number of written words, and scores for content and style are assigned more impressionistically. For the upper grades, linguistic accuracy, style, and content are weighted equally in determination of the overall grade on a written work. As one teacher told me, two-thirds of the grade, then, is based on language, which she finds appropriate for a foreign language class.

**Three Essays and Twelve Teachers**

I explored good writing in English, a foreign language at the Gymnasium Kronshagen, rather than German, the first language, because of the importance of English as an international language taught around the world in second/foreign language classes. German teachers’ perceptions of “good writing” in English admittedly may differ from these teachers’ perceptions of good German writing. All twelve teachers of English at the Gymnasium Kronshagen were asked to select one or two examples of good student writing they had received. In interviews with the twelve teachers and the twelve student authors of the chosen texts, interviewees were asked about their conceptions of good writing in general, about the criteria used for evaluation of writing, and about the positive characteristics of the student text under discussion. Except for a few cases in which interviewees requested that the interview be conducted in English so they could practice their language skills, interviews were conducted in German. Interviews were conducted individually except in one case in which two eighth-graders asked to be interviewed together.

To provide further, more concrete information concerning notions of good writing, the German teachers of English were asked to read and rank a set of three essays written by US ninth-graders and to justify their rankings. Six of the twelve German teachers of English agreed to complete this task. The three essays were written by three different ninth graders in one honors class at a public high school in a Midwestern U.S. city. Each was about a different literary work: one was about Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado,” another about William Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice,” and the third about Frank Stockton’s short story “The Lady, or the Tiger?” (After discussing these literary works in class, the ninth graders had been required to choose one of the works and to write an essay about it.) Essays involving literary analysis were selected for the ranking activity because literary analysis is the primary genre assigned at the German Gymnasium and is also assigned in US high schools. In order to make the task more difficult, and thus generate more interest and involvement (to elicit more comments by rankers), the three essays were of arguably similar quality, each having received an “A” from the teacher who had assigned and graded it. Additionally, since the essays were about different topics, it was hoped that they provided a range of strengths and weaknesses for ranker commentary. Teachers received the student papers, each preceded by a brief summary of the relevant literary work, and were informed that I, not the students, had written the summaries. (See the Appendix for these summaries and the ninth-graders’ texts.) The teachers were told that the students’ assignment had been to write an analysis related to the given literary work. When teachers had completed the ranking task at home, they set up a second interview appointment with me.

In order to make a comparison, six US teachers were also asked about their grading criteria and asked to rank the three essays. The teachers taught at middle schools or high schools in the same midwestern city from which the ninth-graders’ essays came, but none taught at the school these ninth graders attended. After the teachers received the essays in the mail and ranked them on their own, I interviewed them. In interviews, after being asked to describe their criteria for grading written work, these teachers were asked to explain the reasons behind the rankings of the three essays. Additionally, these teachers were asked to describe what kinds of writing assignments they gave their students.
THE RANKINGS

The rankings given to the three ninth-graders’ essays by German and US teachers appear in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Rankings of Ninth-Graders’ Essay Given by German Teachers of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Best</th>
<th>Second Best</th>
<th>Worst</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Amontillado</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant/Lady (tie)</td>
<td>Merchant/Lady (tie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Merchant</td>
<td>Amontillado</td>
<td>Lady</td>
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* Teacher 6 indicated that she could not rank the essays because she found it impossible to judge a work without knowing more about the context in which the text had been written.

Table 2. Rankings of Ninth-Graders’ Essay Given by US Teachers of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Best</th>
<th>Second Best</th>
<th>Worst</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Lady</td>
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<td>9 Amontillado</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Lady</td>
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<td>10 Amontillado</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Amontillado</td>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Lady</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Amontillado</td>
<td></td>
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The majority of the six German teachers preferred “The Cask of Amontillado”; “The Merchant of Venice” fared somewhat better amongst them than “The Lady, or the Tiger?” Like the German teachers of English, the US teachers ranked “Amontillado” as their clear first choice. Also like the German teachers, the US teachers preferred “Merchant” over “Lady,” but the US teachers’ rankings of the two were closer to each other than the German teachers’. This similarity in rankings is significant in light of the closeness in quality; As mentioned previously, all three were given a letter grade of ‘A’ by the teacher who graded them originally; additionally, many of the teachers who ranked them, both German and US, remarked on the difficulty of ranking them because of their similarity in quality.

Not only did the German and US teachers rank the three essays similarly; the two groups also cited sometimes similar reasons for their rankings. Both groups emphasized the importance of linguistic factors, including grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use, as well as the use of reasoning/support for assertions. However, as discussed later in this article, the two groups of teachers also cited some strikingly different reasons for ranking the essays the way they did, especially in regard to task adherence, organization, analysis, self-revelation, and originality. Examination of the details of these results sheds light on the ways in which notions of good writing are culture-bound.

Linguistic Correctness

Not surprisingly, both German and US interviewees agreed that linguistic accuracy was important in student writing. The German teachers regularly cited the importance of avoiding errors, knowing how to use verb forms, and knowing how to use the grammar points emphasized in class. Because linguistic accuracy is perceived to be a potentially objective criterion for evaluation, both teachers and students are quite concerned about how points are deducted for linguistic errors. The German teachers reported accusations by students of inconsistency in this area, and a faculty meeting for teachers of English that I attended was devoted entirely to discussion of a set of error-marking guidelines distributed by the local institute for in-service teacher training. (The number of errors in a student text is divided by the number of words in the text in order to arrive at an “error quotient,” which correlates with a grade for linguistic accuracy, which then figures into students’ overall grade for a piece of writing. As a point of information, no such procedure exists for figuring an error quotient in German-language writing instruction, where teachers assign a more impressionistic grade for language/style.) The German teachers of English acknowledged the inconsistency among themselves concerning various procedures for counting errors, including, for example, whether errors such as the distinction between “there” and “their” were counted as word errors, which would receive one full point off, or counted as spelling errors and receive only a half-point deduction. As German Teacher 6 commented regarding this meeting’s topic of discussion:

We have this ideological handicap: We think that if only we can define clearly and exactly enough what a good, middle, and poor paper are, we’ll all be able to agree and grade similarly. Linguistic accuracy, which makes up one-third of the grade, is the only “objective” criteria we have; it’s supposed to be objective but it’s not. Since students’ grades have such great consequences for them because there are only a certain amount of places in the university for those who want to study subjects such as medicine, it’s important for grades to be comparable from school to school; so we try to be as fair and objective as possible.

Among the six German teachers who ranked the three essays, few made comments about linguistic accuracy in the papers, probably because they contained very few surface-level errors.
As did their German counterparts, the US teachers emphasized the importance of linguistic accuracy. They indicated that their students sometimes have problems with agreement, sentence structure (including fragments and run-ons), mechanics, and sloppiness. In contrast to German teachers' and students' preoccupation with tallying linguistic errors, however, US Teacher 12 indicated that he saw a tendency among his colleagues to take a holistic approach to teaching writing, but that it was important not to lose sight of the basics of punctuation, spelling, and grammar. (These differing approaches to grammar treatment between the two contexts can be at least partially explained by the fact that English is taught at the Gymnasium Kronshagen as a foreign language, while English is the primary language of most students in the United States.) When discussing their rankings of the three essays, only two US teachers made comments about linguistic correctness, both remarking on a jumbled sentence in "Lady."

**Style**

Both German and US interviewees also agreed that good use of language, including vocabulary, was an important aspect of student writing; however, German interviewees emphasized this factor more than their US counterparts. German interviewees defined style as including such areas as range of vocabulary, idiomaticity, sophistication and variation in sentence structure, and clarity of expression. German teachers' remarks regarding style in the three essays focused primarily on unity of style within a work, clarity, and elegance.

Regarding "Amontillado," German Teacher 5 indicated that while attempting to use good expressions, the author overdoes it, leading to a lack of concision; similarly, German Teacher 4 remarked that the author uses many words to make a single point. German Teacher 2 said that the author of "Amontillado" seemed to be trying to impress the reader with the paper through word choice, but that an incongruity between the author's style and "Poe-ish words" like avenging, ruthless, and sinister, actually caused the reader not to take the writer seriously. This problem of incongruity in style, the teacher noted, was even worse in the other two papers.

Regarding "Merchant," German Teachers 2 and 4 remarked on the writer's use of overly colloquial expressions, such as "picky," "knack," and "pull this off," one noting the incongruity in register between these terms and words such as "validated." German Teachers 1 and 5 commented on the clarity of the writing in "Merchant" while German Teacher 4 indicated that the writer relied too much on simple main clauses, using fewer sub-clauses than the writer of "Amontillado."

Regarding style in "Lady," German teachers had primarily negative comments, German Teacher 2 remarking that the writer sometimes tried to use elevated language which turned out to be wrong, and German Teacher 5 noting that the writing was "partly clumsy in expression and sentence structure—not elegant enough." This teacher remarked that the use of language in "Lady" often left the reader wondering what the writer was trying to express. German Teacher 4 noted that the author of "Lady" used a nice metaphor about "paint and brush": "You could argue concerning whether or not this metaphor is fitting here, but it is a stylistic device."

Although they did not speak of it in terms of "style," all six US teachers mentioned the criterion of good language use, including good use of vocabulary, as an important criterion in evaluating writing. However, US teachers made markedly fewer comments regarding this area, and, in stark contrast to the German teachers' emphasis on style, US Teacher 8 indicated, "In general, not necessarily for high school, use of words, variety of sentences—this is what makes writing beautiful; but at the high school level, organization is what is important." Regarding "Amontillado," US Teachers 7 and 12 admired the student author's choice of words, both noticing that his/her tone almost echoed Poe's. US Teacher 12, however, had some misgivings, questioning how much was "lifted" from Poe's writing. US Teachers 7, 9, 10, and 12 criticized the vocabulary choices in "Merchant," with Teacher 7 noting that it was as if the writer were trying to sound like a very well-educated person. Regarding "Lady," Teacher 7 found it "very wordy," while teacher 10 indicated that she liked the sound of the language the writer had used.

The fact that the essays were written in English, the native language of the ninth-grade authors of the texts and the US teachers, but a foreign language in Germany, may have contributed to the fact that the German teachers were more critical of "style" in the essays than were the US teachers. As native English speakers, the US ninth-graders who wrote the essays have more knowledge of colloquial phrases, clichés, and flowery language than do German students of English, and may misguided use this type of language to try to impress teachers. They have a greater likelihood, then, of having problems in this area than German students, whose main exposure to English may be from their English classes. While the US teachers made some comments on vocabulary problems, they seemed to judge them less harshly than their German counterparts, perhaps because US teachers are more familiar with this problem. Additionally, the German teachers may have pointed out more style-related problems because of their status as non-native English speakers, perhaps viewing their interviews with me, a native English speaker, as tests of their own credibility, despite my efforts to avoid conveying any such impression.
Reasoning and Support

Additionally, both German interviewees and US teachers indicated that good reasoning and support for assertions were important criteria for evaluation of student writing. Among the German teachers, “Amontillado” was praised for its logical, convincing reasoning, use of support for assertions, and good use of quotations, but some teachers noted that the paper sometimes exhibited a lack of reasoning and too much repetition. “Merchant,” too, drew conflicting responses from the German teachers in this area; most comments were critical of the student author’s argumentation, with several teachers indicating that the quotations in “Merchant” didn’t seem to support the student author’s assertions. However, “Merchant” was also praised for its use of support, including good use of quotations. “Lady” was criticized for use of a long, unnecessary quotation and unnecessary repetition.

US teachers also indicated the importance of using examples, details, and logical argumentation. US Teacher 12 asserted,

There has to be meat to the matter. There’s a tendency for young writers to do as little as possible in as short a time as possible; but I like to see their work fleshed out—with reasons, support for what they’re saying. Not only does this make for good writing, but teachers in their junior year will expect it.

Most US teachers’ comments regarding support in “Amontillado” were positive, but, like some of the German teachers, US Teacher 11 indicated that she found the paper repetitious and unconvincing. The US teachers judged “Merchant” more favorably in this area than did the German teachers, with several commenting about the good use of support in “Merchant,” including good integration of quotations. Regarding “Lady,” US Teacher 12, who was the only teacher who ranked this essay first, indicated that it had good logic, support, and examples, while US Teacher 7 described it as “illogical, disjointed.”

Adhering to Task

While German and US teachers held in common the evaluation criteria of linguistic concerns and use of support, they differed significantly in other areas. One of the most striking areas of contrast between German and US teachers related to task adherence. In the first round of interviews about their criteria for evaluation of writing, German interviewees emphasized the importance of students answering the question(s) posed in the task, sticking to the given topic, and meeting the genre expectations for the assigned task. As German Teacher 6 explained, a very important type of writing German students undertake is the text interpretation, often based on a literary work. A text interpretation begins with a summary of the work, in which students are to show that they can distinguish what points are essential in a text. After the summary, students answer questions for analysis, posed by the teacher, in which they are expected to explain the relationship between linguistic form and content in the text. Finally, students are asked to offer their own opinion only in answer to a question eliciting it, posed at the end. German Teacher 6 noted that this strict order of summary-interpretation-personal comment is designed to move from objectivity to subjectivity: “We strive for objectivity—there’s always the danger of too much subjectivity, of what sometimes happened with the Besinnungsaufsatz.” (The Besinnungsaufsatz was an essay form in which students were asked to give their opinion on a moral issue; during the Third Reich, students were given moral questions to write about and were expected to give answers in line with the Nazi party’s beliefs. In an interview for an earlier research project, a teacher of German told me a story about the famous author Berthold Brecht, who was asked as a student to write a Besinnungsaufsatz essay on the topic “The glories of dying for the Fatherland.” He was expected to argue in favor of it but did not, and he ended up failing the exam.) German Teacher 6 also mentioned that in the 13th grade, students are exposed to the freestanding “essay,” the characteristics of which are writiness, originality, revelation of the author’s personal commitment to the subject, and exhibition of elegance in style. She noted that while students are required by the curriculum guide only to read such essays, not to write them, she has her 13th graders write them as well. She bases her evaluation on whether they are witty, original, elegant, and show personal commitment.

Another German teacher of English, one who did not participate in the ranking activity but was one of the twelve teachers who completed the initial interview about her criteria for “good writing,” emphasized the importance of students meeting genre requirements. She indicated that she had one student who was an immigrant from Russia and who had an American tutor there. She said that in writing literary interpretations, this student had great difficulty getting away from a spontaneous, witty essay style. When she tried to get him to adhere to the rules of a literary interpretation, he resisted, insisting on a colloquial style, using phrases such as “I might say,” “Here I have to mention again,” and “Last but not least,” and making editorial comments such as “But aren’t we all patients in a psychiatric hospital?” within the literary interpretation, rather than holding such remarks until he writes the personal comments section at the end.

In contrast to the summary-interpretation-personal comment task, in the US, students typically write papers in which they are expected to include a paragraph-long introduction, an explicit thesis statement, several body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. None of the German teachers mentioned adherence to task in relation to the three essays they ranked,
probably because they were unfamiliar with the type of paper the US ninth-graders had written. In contrast to the German teachers, the US teachers made many comments about the notion of task adherence in relation to the three essays, framing their remarks in terms of the use of thesis statements. Regarding the grading criteria they used, US Teachers 8, 9, and 11 indicated that a thesis or focus was important. Teacher 9 indicating, "In good writing, you can pick out what the point is, what they're trying to get across—their thesis," and Teacher 8 asserting, "There should be a thesis statement which tells what the writer says; then, the writer should do it—especially at the high school level." In discussing the three ninth-graders' essays, these three US teachers, along with US Teacher 12, made reference to thesis statements, with Teacher 12 noting that the purpose of a thesis is to draw readers in and help them understand why they are reading. US Teachers 8, 9, and 11 all emphasized that a thesis should make an argument and faulted the writer of "Lady" for not having a thesis, or at least a very arguable one, with Teachers 8 and 9 noting that the paper was more of a description of a character than an argument or analysis. Teacher 9 noted that while "Merchant" contained a thesis statement, it wasn't as arguable as that of "Amontillado."

Clarity/Organization

Closely related to the notion of task adherence, at least for the US teachers, is the criterion of organization. While both German and US interviewees remarked on the importance of organization in writing, the two groups framed their discussion of this criterion in very different ways. German interviewees framed it in terms of clarity of content; they indicated that writers should be able to express what they think so that the writing is understandable, and that the organization is logical. German interviewees did not mention any specific rules for organization, probably because of the guiding questions provided in tasks given to students.

When discussing the ranking of the three ninth-graders' essays, only one German teacher, Teacher 5, commented on the organization of the texts, indicating that in all the papers, the structure was quite clear and included an introduction, the major points, and a short conclusion. He also remarked on what US teachers would probably refer to as thesis statements, but for which he had no terminology. He noted that all the students wrote a statement in the first paragraph laying out what was to come, which he concluded must be standard. He noted,

I think our students would have many problems structuring an essay like this, but we don't teach them this way. . . . My first impression of these three essays was that they were all well structured, although I have to add that "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Lady, or the Tiger?" seem to be too structured; they

overdo it, so it becomes boring to the reader. But that's a question of how you teach them, and it does help you to understand their points. But I don't like it very much.

The fact that the thesis statement is not taught in Germany, and that little emphasis is placed on formal introductions and conclusions, contrasts starkly with the emphasis by US teachers on these elements, including the requirement to match the points in the thesis with the points in the body paragraphs. US Teachers 8 and 10 asserted that organization was a key criterion for judging writing, teacher 10 indicating that it was the criterion on which he had based his ranking of the essays. US Teachers 8, 11, and 12 emphasized the importance of there being a match between the points the thesis statement lays out and the main points in the paper. Teachers 8 and 12 both noted that the points in "Amontillado" matched with those in the thesis. In contrast, Teacher 11 noted that the three main points mentioned in the beginning were Poe's use of foreshadowing, gothic setting, and point of view but that the student didn't seem to follow through with the third point, point of view. Teachers also commented regarding the match between thesis and main points in "Merchant"; US Teacher 8 indicated that they matched, but US Teacher 12 argued that the writer drifted from his/her main point about the women being intelligent.

US teachers also emphasized the necessity of introductions and conclusions, with Teacher 12 noting the importance of having something at the beginning of an essay to draw him in and a good conclusion that serves as a "neat way to wrap up the whole package." Both US Teachers 10 and 12 commented that the writer of "Lady" used a quotation well to introduce the paper, Teacher 10 noting that "Merchant" used a similar technique, but criticizing the paper for lacking a smooth introduction. Regarding conclusions, "Merchant" was criticized for starting the conclusion with "In summary," and "Lady" was criticized for starting its conclusion with "Finally." In contrast, "Amontillado" was praised for its subtle restatement of the thesis in the conclusion.

Ideas and Analysis

While US teachers focused on organization, thesis statements, and formal introductions and conclusions, the German teachers made many more comments than the US teachers regarding the importance of ideas and analysis in writing. They especially emphasized that it was important for students to show in their writing about a text that they had understood it, could analyze it, and could draw and justify their own conclusions about it. Students in the lower grades concentrate on recapitulating the content of a text when writing about it, and as they get older, are expected to exhibit a higher level of understanding, being able to discuss, for example, the function
of literary devices such as repetition, simile, and personification, or of scene changes in a play. One teacher noted that it is often difficult for students to move beyond simply summarizing texts to analyzing them.

In the German teachers' discussion of the quality of the content of the three essays, "Amontillado" fared best. German Teacher 1 complimented its discussion of how Poe's style contributes to the story: "Here, we emphasize this very much, and in the Abitur [exit exam], there is always a question about stylistic or rhetorical devices. So I like this essay because that's something we stress." German Teacher 3 indicated that she thought that "Amontillado" showed a very high quality of literary criticism regarding narrative elements, point of view, and dramatic irony, but that she expected more sophisticated conclusions about foreshadowing. Despite having ranked "Amontillado" as the best of the three essays, German Teacher 4 noted that "the content is thin," and German Teacher 2 indicated that while the writer has a controlling idea, the idea itself is not always convincing.

"Merchant," which ranked overall second best in German teachers' rankings, drew criticism from German Teacher 3, who indicated that she thought the topic of the paper was too simple. Similarly, German Teacher 5, despite ranking it as the best paper, noted that the statements about the male character "could have been less one-sided, to show different aspects of each character's personality." Additionally, several criticized the writer for her statements about authorial intent. For example, German Teacher 3 noted, "The student seems to identify with Shakespeare. She writes things like, 'He used to do..." and 'He wanted to do... and it worked.' It's stylistically nice, but from the point of view of literary criticism, it's questionable." German Teacher 2, who ranked the essay second, criticized this student for making bold statements in the beginning about what Shakespeare wanted to do, arguing that writers should wait to make such claims until they have proved them.

Like "Merchant," "Lady" also drew fire for attempting to discuss what the author intended. As German Teacher 3 indicated, "You have to write about the text, structure, narrative technique, and so on; when you try to write about the author's intentions, it's a gray area." Others faulted the writer of this paper for lacking a clear central idea, one asserting that it was more of a summary than a literary interpretation. The author of "Lady" was praised, however, for arriving at some of his own conclusions and for getting to the point: "She says that the princess is the main character and that contradictions are revealed in the story, and the rest of the essay deals with all the elements of contradiction."

While US teachers also commented on the literary analysis in the students' essays, they did so in much less detail. Regarding "Amontillado," US Teacher 10 commented,

The combination of literary ideas with analysis is wonderful. One of the things I liked best about this paper was the discussion of literary elements like gothic elements, foreshadowing, and first-person narrative. First-person narrative and how it contributes to the story is a hard thing to analyze.

US Teacher 12, however, argued that the author of "Amontillado" relied too much on long quotations rather than analysis and, in contrast, argued that "Lady" not only covered the ideas in the story with good depth and breadth, but also included more of the author's own words and analysis. US Teacher 8, though, found "Lady" to be less of a literary analysis and more of a report on a character. Regarding "Merchant," US Teacher 7 indicated she agreed that Shakespeare "tried to support women more than other men in his time period;" in contrast, US Teacher 11 indicated that she didn't think Shakespeare was consciously trying to create role models, as the author of "Merchant" asserts.

Self-revelation/Originality

While US teachers placed relatively little emphasis on literary analysis in comparison to their German counterparts, three of them indicated appreciation of self-revelation and/or originality in writing. As indicated earlier, German teachers noted that in text interpretations, personal opinions should be included only in response to the question eliciting them, which usually comes after a summary and answers to several questions for analysis posed by teachers. In contrast, three of the US teachers emphasized the importance of students revealing themselves and their original insights throughout their essay. US Teacher 11 indicated that "A" papers were those that really engaged her in a new way and revealed a new insight or way of looking at something, while US Teacher 12 noted that he considered writing to be excellent when, in addition to all the features of good writing he had mentioned, it had flair, heart, a sense of how the writer is being revealed in the writing, for example, passion in a persuasive piece of writing, or, if it's expository, the writer's interest in the subject is revealed through the details and information provided. There are kids who are competent in writing, but their writing lacks this flair, this independence, this sense of who they are.

This teacher noted that despite his low ranking of "Amontillado," he liked that "it had more heart in it." US Teacher 11 noted that she liked how the author of the "Merchant" essay wrote that because of Portia's great intelligence and wit, "one could only dream of being her." This teacher indicated that this personal touch on the part of the student author made the essay seem to come alive.
Cultural Differences and Their Implications

The German and US teachers gave fairly similar rankings to the set of three essays; additionally, both German and US interviewees agreed on the importance of good language use, including linguistic accuracy and use of appropriate vocabulary, and on the importance of the use of good reasoning and support for assertions. However, the two groups differed in that the German teachers placed more emphasis on formal literary analysis than did their US counterparts, who emphasized thesis statements, formal introductions and conclusions, organization, self-revelation, and originality.

On the one hand, both US and German teachers of English have similar objectives when assigning writing: In both contexts, teachers aim to help students read, understand, and analyze a text, as well as to include personal opinion in their writing. On the other hand, the types of texts that teachers assign are quite different: German students write three-part essay exams in which they 1) summarize the text, 2) answer “interpretation” questions about the text, and 3) offer a personal reaction at the end. In contrast, US students typically write stand-alone essays, which are required to have a thesis statement and matching sub-points. And, as exemplified by the results of this study, German and US teachers of English sometimes focus on different criteria when evaluating student writing.

What cultural factors inform these different approaches to writing instruction and evaluation? For instance, what leads to the comparably intense focus in the US on students adhering to a standard format that involves an explicit thesis statement and matching subpoints? One possible explanation relates to differing attitudes between the two cultures regarding intellectualism and scholarship. Michael Clyne argues that in scholarly writing done within the German tradition, emphasis is placed on extent and correctness of text rather than on form, and that German texts are more likely to contain digressions while English texts have more advanced organizers, definitions, and topic sentences. According to Clyne, US writers, in comparison to German writers, may be expected to convey information in a way that is as clear as possible. The expectation of US readers that texts should be transparent and that readers should be able to read and interpret texts for themselves may correlate with US cultural values of equality and non-elitism. This contrasts with German values regarding scholarly activity, in which it may be more acceptable or expected for a writer to exhibit his/her intellectual prowess by writing obscurely. Clyne argues that “in English-speaking countries, most of the onus falls on writers to make their texts readable, whereas it is the readers who have to make the extra effort in German-speaking countries so that they can understand the texts, especially if the author is an academic... Scholarship is mystified; because of its exalted nature, it does not need to be readily comprehended” (238).

Besides a difference between German and US teachers regarding expectations relating to organization, German teachers emphasized the importance of students holding back their personal opinions until the end of the writing task, while several US teachers indicated their preference for essays that reveal the author and his/her perspective throughout the writing. In an interview for a previous research project, one German teacher of English teacher told me that when writing about their own opinions, it is crucial that young people first know something about others’ opinions, and then build their own opinion from that. Two teachers indicated that the summary-analysis-personal comment format was designed to encourage objectivity, especially as a counterresponse to the Besinnungsaufsatz, popular during the Third Reich. (According to Albert Bremerich-Vos, assigning the literary or interpretive essay was forbidden during the Third Reich insofar as it criticized the works of German authors, “spoiling” them for the German youth.) Cultural differences regarding preferences in this area may also relate to differing views about the purpose of education. German teachers do not appear to feel obligated to make all lessons immediately relevant to students’ lives, instead assuming that learning and knowledge are valuable in and of themselves. The German school system seems to place great emphasis on transmitting a cultural and literary heritage to students, as illustrated by the curriculum guide for German language, which describes the role of schooling as follows: “The duty of all education and upbringing is to lead children and youth into our history and culture and, through acquisition of knowledge, capabilities, insights, and conduct, to enable them to take their place in and further develop society and culture” (Lehrplan Gymnasium: Deutsch 1). In contrast, education in the US may have a more practical bent, with students expecting what they learn to be immediately relevant to their lives, and with teachers attempting to make clear connections between the material at hand and students’ life experiences. This is evidenced by some of the US teachers’ indications that they valued self-revelation and a “personal touch” in student writing.

So, while teachers in both contexts may have somewhat similar specific goals related to writing about other texts, differing attitudes concerning intellectualism and the purpose of education in general, along with differing historical contexts, affect writing pedagogy and the evaluation of student work. At the Gymnasium Kronshagen, writing in English classes is considered a means of teaching (as well as testing) subject matter, that subject matter being English-language literature and culture as well as the English language itself. German teachers of English emphasize close reading of the texts from which this content comes, and their students explore the meaning of a given text through writing summaries and answers to questions requiring a close reading. Writing itself is not considered a legitimate focus
of study beyond the ninth or tenth grade. In contrast, the US English teachers appear to consider writing a subject area in and of itself rather than viewing it primarily as a means of learning. In writing an essay, US students are required to create a free-standing interpretation of a text; such a task requires them to read, understand, and interpret a text rather than to go step-by-step in writing as the German students do, who summarize, answer teacher-posed analysis questions, and then answer a teacher-posed question eliciting their personal reactions.

But formulating a clear, arguable thesis about a given work is a very challenging task, especially when writing about difficult texts that may not seem immediately relevant to students' lives. It seems that the Gymnasium Kronshagen teachers are less ambitious about what they require their students to do, perhaps recognizing the difficulty of undertaking text analysis. This is somewhat ironic, given that their students are in the upper echelon of a three-tiered educational system that is considered rigorous by international standards. Perhaps it is the difficulty of writing authoritatively, convincingly, and analytically about a difficult literary text (or about any complex subject matter) that has led US teachers to prescribe rather rigid formats for student writing in order to provide them with guidance. Additionally, US teachers may emphasize revelation of one's inner self, a task that is more manageable, and perhaps more appealing, for students of this age. A possible negative consequence, however, of assigning students to write these essays is a potential "dumbing down" of writing instruction, with students focusing more on the prescribed form, and less on the content of their writing.

How might this information about pedagogical and cultural differences impact US teachers' practices?

First, perhaps US teachers of composition (and literature) might reflect on the difficulty of the tasks they set for their students: Whether they ask their students to write about a complex text or issue, they might recognize that they are asking students to write authoritatively on subjects on which they are not authorities; this may encourage students to make hasty judgments, oversimplifying the issues surrounding a given topic in their rush to produce a dissertation statement so that they can complete the writing task they have been assigned. In order to slow down the process and foster comprehension and reflection, US teachers might, as a lead-in to a thesis-driven essay, experiment with the summary-analysis-personal comment format of writing task, so common in German schools (not only in English class, incidentally, but in writing done in virtually all classes across the Gymnasium Kronshagen's curriculum). Additionally, to help students build the expertise in one subject that is necessary to write authoritatively and convincingly, teachers might consider employing sequenced assignments based on sustained content. (Such assignments involve a student writing several different types of papers on the same topic. See Pally, Leki, "Building," and Lax and Reichelt.)

However, writing specialists and teachers may want to consider going one step further, relinquishing some of the control over the tasks they give students in order to provide them with opportunities to "own" the work they do. Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee advocate such a step in their discussion of the case of Emily, a 12th-grader writing a paper about All Quiet on the Western Front. Emily was given a choice of nine topics in the form of questions and ideas about the book, and she selected the following: "Paul Baumer uses such adjectives as 'superfluous,' 'lost,' 'crude,' and 'insensible' to describe himself and his comrades. Explain and discuss the reasons for their change from the 'Iron Youth' to alienated and hopeless 'automata'" (172). Emily's teacher organized the task around the following ordered stages: 1) development of a focused thesis, 2) elaboration of the thesis through an introductory paragraph, 3) a rough draft, 4) peer response, and 5) a final, graded draft. According to Langer and Applebee, the teacher's goals reflected formal concerns that conflicted with the idea of exploring new ideas through the writing that students undertake; this caused Emily difficulty by requiring her to be preoccupied with formal considerations even as she was trying to develop her own ideas and discover the content of her essay. In this context, Langer and Applebee argue, the steps in the writing process that the teacher laid out became little more than opportunities to check that the form of the essay had been properly executed.

Langer and Applebee advocate a different approach to teaching students to write about literature, one they call "scaffolding." Scaffolding involves modeling for students appropriate strategies for grappling with new problems that students can internalize and apply to new situations. Scaffolding often takes the form of well-sequenced questions that help students think through a given writing problem, often eliciting what they know about the topic, what the purpose of their writing is, and how they think they can best achieve that purpose. Langer and Applebee emphasize that writing is driven by its purpose, not merely by its form, and that as the content of a message comes together in the writer's mind, it does so with some organized form. Content and form, they write, "do not occur separately in the mind of the writer—unless molded to do so as a result of inappropriate instruction. Such a separation, we found, was a major flaw in even the best of the writing instruction examined during the course of our studies" (179).

Other research suggests that writing specialists and composition teachers might even reconsider whether it is worthwhile to assign compositions requiring introductions with explicit thesis statements, matching body paragraphs, and separate concluding paragraphs. As
evidenced by the results of Barbara Walvoord’s study of thinking and writing in four college classrooms, this format is not required by instructors in all disciplines; the instructors in this study, while valuing clear organization, generally placed much more emphasis on content factors rather than on form. And as Virginia Perdue argues in her article in *The Writing Instructor*, the type of argument embodied in thesis-driven writing is “increasingly challenged by the growing value various disciplines, including our own, are placing on uncertainty, mediation, and exploration in the effort to make knowledge” (141). Perdue argues that the traditional focus on the thesis statement as presented in mainstream first-year composition textbooks discourages critical thinking and “may close off exploration and questioning, encouraging students to value the security of clear answers over questions” (139).

Since, as Ilona Leki notes in her article “Good Writing,” implicit, varying, ambiguous, and even conflicting definitions lurk behind terms that are often used to talk about “good writing.” Rather than relying on formulas that may discourage critical thought, teachers might encourage in-class student discussion of what good writing is, including application of students’ criteria for good writing to specific texts (including student texts). Although different students possess varying degrees of expertise as writers, most will have something to contribute to such discussions. Teachers can model responses to texts which emphasize interest in the content of the writing and attention to its success in communicating; based on this, students and teacher alike can engage in numerous discussions of texts, especially student texts, offering the authors praise, critique, and suggestions for improvement.

Besides these implications for the classroom, this discussion has relevance to the rating of student texts written for placement, exit, and proficiency exams. Often, such essays are rated on “organization.” The description of this criterion may need to be revised, especially if exam raters score writing based on the presence of such elements as the paragraph-long introduction, explicit thesis statement with matching points in the body, and the separate concluding paragraph. Such an approach may not only discriminate against those unwilling to adopt all of these conventions, but is also unfair to those who may be unfamiliar with it, including international students.

In fact, the results of this research are also relevant to composition teachers who have non-native English speaking students in their classes, especially students who received some or all of their pre-university education in other countries. These teachers should be aware that conventions of essay writing in the US, including organizational format and the concept of a “thesis statement,” may be unfamiliar to such students. Additionally, students may be unfamiliar with the criteria used to evaluate writing in the US, as well as the relative weight assigned to those criteria. (For more information on differences between ESL and native English speaking writers, see Leki’s *Understanding ESL Writers*, and Silva.)

While this paper compares notions of “good writing” in only two environments, the results have important implications for writing instruction in a broad range of contexts. Further research investigating criteria for evaluation of writing and understandings of “good writing” in other contexts could provide more information for curriculum planners, teachers of writing, and test developers about other criteria for writing evaluation that may be culture bound. Further research might also include a collection of information about the classroom procedures surrounding writing instruction rather than focusing only on student texts and information from teacher interviews, as this study does. Additionally, researchers conducting similar work in the future might incorporate interview questions into their research that focus more specifically on teacher perceptions of “good writing” in terms of various specific genres of student writing rather than “good writing” in general.

Toledo, Ohio

Notes

1 For detailed discussions of German-language and English-language writing instruction at this Gymnasium, see Reichelt.

2 For a fuller discussion of the research context, including sociocultural influences on education in Germany; the history of writing instruction in Germany; and current writing pedagogy, including writing assignments, writing-related classroom activities, feedback practices, students’ writing processes, and perceptions of differences between writing in a first language (German) and in a second language (English), see Reichelt.

Works Cited


wall, and bricks up the entrance. Despite Fortunato’s screaming, Montresor leaves him there to die.

**Student’s Text: The Avenging Soul**

“I must not only punish, but punish with impunity.” This quotation from “The Cask of Amontillado” reveals Montresor’s sinister mind and ruthless ideas for avenging Fortunato. Reflecting his psychopathic thoughts and life of intoxication in his short story, Edgar Allan Poe intertwines terror and hatred to maintain the attention of the reader. By manifesting evil, Poe deftly creates suspense in “The Cask of Amontillado” by utilizing gothic elements, foreshadowing, and point of view.

To create a frightful setting, Poe adds gothic elements to “The Cask of Amontillado.” For example, the colorful motley of Fortunato and Montresor’s beautiful roquelaire add to the feeling of a gothic time period. The damp and murky mazes of the catacombs with skeletons and human remains covering the crypt walls create an eerie effect. Through the dark mazes, Montresor leads Fortunato to his doom with two flamebeaux, torches that symbolize gothic tools. By using many gothic elements, Poe creates a frightening and melancholy atmosphere.

Furthermore, Poe uses foreshadowing to prophesy the upcoming evils that contribute to the rise of suspense. “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge... At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled... A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” are thoughts of Montresor that foreshadow the revenge against Fortunato. In the interminable catacombs, Montresor and Fortunato encounter intermingled bones and pincushions that forebode death and pain. Also, Fortunato’s jester costume foretells that Montresor will make a fool out of him in a hideous way. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Edgar Allan Poe uses the technique of foreshadowing to forebode the horrific fate of Fortunato.

Along with the gothic elements and foreshadowing, Poe utilizes first person narration in his short story to portray a man’s passion for revenge. Montresor, the narrator, reveals his macabre plan of revenge through his thoughts that foreshadow Fortunato’s fate. For example, “You who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity” is a thought of Montresor’s that exposes his plans for Fortunato’s inevitable death. Through Montresor’s narration, Poe divulges his tone and feelings about his characters such as “He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared.” Montresor’s narration reveals dramatic irony when the reader is aware of the planned murder of Fortunato. Like two tributaries merging into one river, Edgar Allan Poe synthesizes foreshadowing, tone, and irony into one aspect as a way of first person major narration.
Forever a master of creating evil, Edgar Allan Poe uses gothic elements, foreshadowing, and point of view to build suspense. Poe leads the reader through endless mazes and vaults into the innermost recesses of the catacombs to Fortunato’s final immolation. Not only are his merciful thoughts reflections in “The Cask of Amontillado,” but Poe also divulges hatred and vengeance of the soul.

“Merchant”

Summary of William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (written by researcher)

Bassanio asks his friend Antonio, a merchant, for money to travel to Belmont to meet the heiress Portia, whom he hopes to marry. Because Antonio has invested all his money in trade, he can not lend Bassanio the money, but gives Bassanio permission to borrow the money on his credit. Shylock, who hates Antonio, agrees to lend the money on the condition that, if the loan is not repaid on time, Shylock will get a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Meanwhile, Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, upsets her father by eloping with Lorenzo, one of Bassanio and Antonio’s companions.

Bassanio travels to see Portia and to try to fulfill the requirements of Portia’s father’s will, which stipulates that to win her in marriage, a man must choose correctly among three small chests, one each made of gold, silver, and lead. Provided that Bassanio chooses the right chest, Nerissa, Portia’s maid, has agreed to marry Gratiano, one of Bassanio’s companions. Bassanio chooses the right chest, but the two couples’ happiness is interrupted by news that Antonio cannot repay Shylock because Antonio’s ventures have failed. Shylock insists on extracting the pound of Antonio’s flesh. In response to the situation, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as a lawyer and clerk, respectively, and argue successfully against Shylock, thus saving Antonio.

Student’s Text: The Women of The Merchant of Venice

Women were definitely not treated equally during the Elizabethan times in England. They were often thought of as man’s accessory. Shakespeare, however, knew that women were in fact just as intelligent as men. He used the women in The Merchant of Venice to prove it. Through the characters of Jessica, Nerissa, and Portia, Shakespeare exemplified the intellectual and witty woman. Jessica was a woman in the play who needed to possess great courage. First of all, she had a mind of her own, which led her into falling in love with Lorenzo. The problem with that was that Jessica was Jewish and Lorenzo, Christian. Therefore, the relationship was a secret kept from her father. Eventually, Jessica took her chance and sneaked out of her father’s house in order to elope with Lorenzo. She also stole much of her father’s money. When her father found out, Jessica had the common sense to hide out until she and Lorenzo were out of Venice. Jessica also understood love. She realized that true love was not superficial and that it could see beyond the outer layer. “... But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that they themselves commit; for if they could, Cupid himself would blush to see me thus transformed into a boy.” She voiced her thoughts about this when she was dressed as a torchbearer in order to disguise herself for her elopement. Because Jessica had valiancy, she was able to live her life the way that SHE wanted to.

Along with Jessica, Nerissa was an important woman in The Merchant of Venice. First and foremost, Nerissa maintained a constant sense of loyalty to her mistress, Portia, at all times. Although she was in love with Gratiano, she would not marry him unless Bassanio chose the correct casket in order to marry Portia. She stood by her word and when Bassanio did in fact choose the correct casket, she married Gratiano. Another time that Nerissa showed her intellectuality was when she and Portia dressed as men to help out their husbands’ friend Antonio. Here she exemplified another form of loyalty, that to her husband. Even though Nerissa seemed serious, she did in fact have a sense of humor. She first fooled her husband into thinking that she was a boy, and secondly got him to give her his ring that she once told him to never take off. When Gratiano came home from Antonio’s trial, Nerissa scolded him for giving away the ring and claimed that since the “clerk” had the ring, she would sleep with the clerk. Nerissa proved to be a fine illustration of a very loyal, loving, and whimsical female.

Although Nerissa and Jessica were important females in The Merchant of Venice, the key female character was Portia. In the story, she showed such great intelligence and wit that one could only dream of being her. First of all, Portia was very picky about whom she wanted as a husband (even though it was not her choice). She even stated, “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father’s will. I am glad this parcel of woeers are so reasonable; for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence; and I pray God grant them a fair departure.” In simpler words, Portia was trying to say that she was thankful that the courtiers were leaving because she did not like any of them. Another trait of Portia’s was her sharp wit. She had a comment on every suitor: for the Neapolitan Prince, all he ever talked about was his horse. For the County Palatine, he only frowned. Ms. Le Bon was just a stereotypical man. “God made him, and therefore let him pass as a man,” is what Portia once said of him. Folconbridge could not communicate with her because he was not bilingual. The Scottish lord was not trustworthy because he was always borrowing money, and the German was a drunk. Portia validated her knack of warding off and fooling the suitors that she did not like. For example, when the Duke of Saxony’s nephew, the drunkard, wanted to choose a casket, she told Nerissa, “...set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket; for if the devil be within and the temptation without, I know he will choose it [the wrong casket].” Perhaps the most important and evident example of Portia’s intelligence was when she dressed up as a lawyer. She did this in order to save her husband’s (Bassanio’s) friend, Antonio. In order to pull this off, Portia wrote a letter to her cousin. He gave her the proper things to go to court. Those things were legal advice, a letter of recommendation, and the necessary attire. When she went to court, she won the case by her keen knowledge of the law and saved the day. Portia was unquestionably the heroine of the play.
In summary, the three women of *The Merchant of Venice* represented intellectual beings. Just because they were women did not mean that they were not smart. They, in fact, proved to be keener than the men. Shakespeare wanted the women in his play to illustrate great role models for women everywhere, and it worked.

“Lady”

*Summary of Frank Stockton’s “The Lady, or the Tiger?” (written by researcher)*

When a “barbaric” king discovers that his daughter, the princess, has a lover, he prescribes the regular punishment for wrongdoers: The young man must stand in an arena and choose between two doors. Behind one is a tiger, and if the young man chooses that door, the tiger will eat him. Behind the other door is a beautiful lady, and if the young man chooses that door, he will be married to her. The princess has found out what is behind each door and signals to her lover to tell him which door to open. The narrator asks the reader to ponder whether, given how deeply and jealously the princess loves the young man, the princess has led him to the lady or the tiger.

*Student’s Text: An Equal Mystery*

“This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious as his own.” One day, Frank Stockton gave birth to a brilliant idea and from it contrived a suspenseful, thought-provoking short story that has since sent the human mind racing—the short story, “The Lady or the Tiger?” For this story Stockton created numerous characters who each played a significant part in the plot, but one seemed to stand out: the princess. Like so many other characters in literature, she found herself torn between love and jealousy, forced to make a decision that would haunt her for the rest of her life. When Stockton related to the reader what the princess did, what she thought and felt, and how others reacted to her, he brought the fiery-spirited princess to life.

One of the most important ways that Stockton described the princess to the reader seemed by telling what she did. In many points of the story, one may have found clues to determine the personality of the princess. Many a wise tongue has uttered the ancient saying: “Actions speak louder than words.” No exception to this rule, the princess’ actions revealed much about her. When the king learned of her love affair with the young man, he instantly cast him into prison and anxiously awaited the young man’s trial of poetic justice. Goaded by her vicious intensity, determination and curiosity, the princess did what no other person before her had dared do. She found out behind which door stood the beauteous lady and behind which door the ruthless, hungry lion awaited to devour the young man. Some may have thought the princess loved the young man, but what she did make this fact a certainty; for who could deny the perilous consequence of such an action? The reader learnt from this that the princess possessed the strength of mind to know she held the fate of her lover in her very own hands, and that she loved him enough to endanger her safety and peace of mind. Also, the fact that she attended the trial proved to the reader her barbaric nature and intense soul. By telling what the princess did, Stockton created a ruthless conflict and brought the story and the princess to life.

What the princess thought and felt seemed a very transparent window to her soul and made her appear in the reader’s eyes a real person, with feelings and emotions. “From the moment that the decree had gone forth that her lover should decide his fate in the king’s area, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it.” This quotation showed the reader that the princess’ knowledge of who waited behind each door haunted her thoughts, and that she loved him enough to torture herself with indecision. Stockton mentioned in the story that the princess had often seen, or thought that she had seen, the lady behind the door flitting with her lover. “With all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.” When the reader read this quotation and others, it became apparent to him or her that the princess felt hatred and jealousy toward the lady that waited behind the door. Stockton did not neglect to include human traits such as jealousy when he created the princess, which made her appear human.

Finally, how other people reacted to the princess, an effective method of characterization, remained one of the most important used by Stockton. What she may have said, done, thought, or felt would not show nearly as much about the character than what one would learn from others’ reactions. The king in this story loved his daughter with a protective nature. As Stockton described: “She was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him above all humanity.” When the king became aware of her love affair, he felt the young man unworthy of his royal daughter, and incriminated him for just this reason. This proved to the reader that the princess must have been a likeable person, considering the king’s adoration and protection of her and the risk the young man took when he loved her. Another example of how other characters reacted to the princess was cited later in the story, when her lover stood in the area, about to make his decision: “When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers...he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He knew her nature and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain herself this thing.” He trusted her, whether a wise decision or not. The point remained that when she pointed her finger, he followed its course without hesitation. This showed the reader the trust he possessed in her and suggested that she proved herself an honest person. He also expected her curiosity and determination to guide her in finding out behind which door stood lady or beast, which showed the reader her fearless nature. The reactions to the princess seemed revealing ones, full of clues to the princess’ nature.

When Stockton contrived “The Lady or the Tiger?” he used methods of characterization like paint and brush; with each stroke, he painted a clearer
picture of her personality and brought her to life. The reader learnt much from these methods of characterization. From what she did, the reader learnt of her intense, fearless, determined nature, which caused her to find out what or who waited behind the doors. What she thought or felt revealed a profusion of facts and left clues and ideas blooming in the minds of the reader about which door she chose. Finally, how others reacted to the princess made the reader aware of how trustworthy she seemed, and the level of adoration her father felt toward her. Stockton breathed life into this character when he described to the reader what the princess did, thought and felt, and how others reacted to her.