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Getting Inside of Literature

Mark Shaheen

Interview as Performance: Gathering and Sharing How it Was and How it is From How Writing is Written

"...and the whole business of writing is living in (that) contemporariness. Each generation has to live in that. The thing that is important is that nobody knows what the contemporariness is. In other words, they don't know where they are going, but they are on their way...."

-Gertrude Stein

Several years ago while a fellow of the Red Cedar Writing Project site at Michigan State University, I began to explore ways in which the interview could be taken from its rather perfunctory question-and-answer product-driven schema and made more dynamic by including self-interview and incorporating the idea of *interview as performance*. Interviewing oneself may sound at first to be a bit egocentric, but from a battery of self-interviews I have learned several things: how to use technology and especially camcorder hardware to its fullest advantage; how to develop atmosphere in the interview setting that allows for ease in communication as well as subtle cueing tips; how to develop questions that enable the interviewee to "ramble"; and how to capture other aspects of the interviewee on tape and video to give a more well-rounded view of the presentation. After all, if you are going to ask someone to be bold enough to speak before a camera, good manners declare that you understand their perspective firsthand.

Self-interview and interview-as-performance are important if we are to accept Miss Stein's view of how writing is written: in the interview and subsequent transcription, we behold the stories and reflections on who and what we are in the present. We may not be able to define our present-

ness, but like diaries, we can look back on our own interviews and the interviews of others in order to help define our "contemporariness," which, in the immediate state of society, seems ever more ephemeral and easily forgotten. In the interview and interview-as-performance are found profound ways to hear and create fabrics that will allow our past and present to remain familiar despite the ever existing demands of change.

The idea of performance enters into the interview dynamic when we allow the chance element or found aspects into the viewing process. This is what I refer to as the *found interview*. The idea of a found interview came to me from the theater. From a theatrical perspective, there are a variety of spaces to perform in, one of them being a found space. Producing *West Side Story* in a downtown alley is an example of performing in a found space and relates to aspects of the found interview in this way: while the script and choreography and singing are what the director establishes from a vision, the setting is fresh and dynamic and holds for each viewer his or her own previous personal relationship to that space. Consequently, an object, a color, a song on the radio, a dress or tie in the interview holds for the audience its own previous relationship as well, and creates a second and third level of meaning dynamically differ-

ent for each person, thus creating interview-as-performance, which, like a piece of literature, holds for each reader subtle differences in theme and interpretation.

The idea of a found interview can be used in the classroom in several ways. One way that I have managed to help students become more involved in the lives of the characters they are reading is to have them videotape an interview between reader and character. One book that the interview seemed especially well suited for is Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The character of Curley's wife was the subject of an interview with several female students in my Sophomore English class who were not happy with the fact that Curley's wife has no name. They also felt that the male members of the class looked at her advances in the book toward the male characters as being exclusively sexually motivated. And finally, they wanted to know what it was like to be the only female surrounded by field hands in the depression-era West.

Gathering information on costumes, both Hollywood glamour and simple mainstream fabrics of the 1930s, as well as hair styles, music, lifestyles, and expectations of pre-World War II women in America, along with knowledge they had directly from the text, Melissa and Andrea began to formulate questions they would ask the character on video. Each student signed out the school camcorder for an evening and interviewed themselves on what they wanted to accomplish on the assignment. This was their chance to learn how to use the equipment as well as to show the class the process they took in developing the assignment: sort of a "Making of the Interview of Curley's Wife" video.

Once the questions were written and edited with the help of the teacher, and once the interview day and time were set, the two students decided who would be the interviewer and who would be Curley's wife. Because both had worked meticulously on the process and development of information from the book and outside sources, both could play the role of the interviewee equally well. We decided that chance in the form of flipping a nickel was acceptable.

At this point in the process, both Andrea and Melissa began to doubt all the work they had done and what difference it would make to the class and their understanding of the class text. The original goals of the interview were reexamined. Andrea and Melissa had originally wanted to understand the role of Curley's wife who, in the story, at once seems highly pivotal and yet "thrown away." I asked them what difference a better understanding of her role would make for the text as a whole, and they began to deliberate why Steinbeck had seemingly slighted the only female in this book. Andrea and Melissa decided that the angle of the interview had to in some way touch on the character's insights into why she was written off literally by the men in the novel, and what reasons the author left her nameless, minor in scope and story, "the Eve to Lenny's Adam," and eventually dead. The process of their interview now seemed to double back on itself as a way to interrogate the intentions of the author who may or may not have completely understood how students of the 1990s would critically approach his invention of a system that negated a woman's identity in a novel that takes place in the 1930s. Renewed and ready for attack, Andrea and Melissa gathered their materials in the designated space (a neighbor's old tool shed) and proceeded as planned.

The interview itself was a great success. Shown on the classroom television, students were in awe of the authentic costume, clarity, and insight of this otherwise nameless minor character. The interview space was lit by a naked light bulb and seemed dirty and dark. Melissa and Andrea had found music such as "Am I Blue?" and dubbed the music into the beginning and end of their document. The transcript, which was elevated from mere transcription to a "social drama" was even more arresting as the writing took on theatrical elements: Curley's wife now the apparent protagonist and Steinbeck the antagonist.

Interviewer

So what you are saying is that Steinbeck was trying to show you as vulnerable and alienated, a real product of your desperate times.

Curley's Wife

You say "your desperate times" like times are not always hard in some way for everyone. I believe I am honest, sensitive, naive, a dreamer. And strong. Are you any of these things? Can you be these things nowadays without disappointment? Without someone trying to "get you" for wanting to be different?

Interviewer

You say you are honest. Some people think you just wanted to go out on your husband and that was your problem. That you asked for what you eventually got.

Curley's Wife

I wanted to tell the truth. Everytime I got close (to the truth), whether it was because I was lonely or that I wanted to be an actress, I was hurt. By the author? I don't know. By the men the author created. They thought I was trouble because Curley was trouble. He cut me off from any company. Maybe he (Steinbeck) was saying it is a man's world and if you aren't tough like a man, if you don't just swallow your dreams and who you really are, because in desperate times people do these things, then you can't fit into the world...

Interviewer

Illusion versus reality.

Curley's Wife

I was illusive. I still believed in, you know, dreams. I was that soft thing that Lenny

always seemed to need. To live. And you saw what happened to me. And to Lenny. I don't really believe all of this you know. No room for dreams in the real world. I still believe in dreams. I think Steinbeck used me. He did what he did to make his point. But that doesn't mean he is 100 percent right you know...

The idea of interview-as-performance and self interview serve to help students in several ways: through careful preparation and presentation on their parts, students not only show us their abundant analytical skills in dealing with character motivation and author intentions, but they learn so many skills important to them in their futures. Learning how to access information from people is not a skill we tend to develop in our high school classrooms. Yet we are told as educators that future generations will need to have highly developed people skills. The use of technology also is important, not only as a way to preserve "contemporariness," but as a way to find and explore voice and form of presentation and understanding. Finally, the self-interview that Andrea and Melissa did on their own illustrates their ability to reflect on their own process of gathering and sharing how it was and how it is, which, in the ever shifting paradigm of education, seems to be the latest (and most alien) tool of assessment. By using interview as a means toward performance and writing, we allow students to capture what Miss Stein calls the "where we are going," thus bridging a gap in the understanding of where we have been and being "on our way."