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Ann Elisabeth Pettersen Stevens

Master's Thesis

# **Short stories as a Source of Cultural Insight When Teaching English**

Noveller som en kilde til kulturell innsikt i  
engelskundervisning

Kultur- og språkfagenes didaktikk, med fordypning i engelsk

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background and research questions

Since the beginning of language, stories have provided a great way for children to learn about the history, culture, values and practical skills of their society. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko states that: “The human capacity for language and storytelling go hand in hand” (2012, p. XVII). Being able to communicate in a language entails more than just understanding the words and being able to produce and pronounce sentences. It also requires knowledge and understanding of the cultural aspects of the language.

When I took a course on African literature a few years ago, I was exposed to literature from cultures and societies I knew very little about. At the end of the course, however, I felt I had not only been introduced to a lot of interesting literature, but that I had learned much about values, ways of thinking, conflicts and issues facing people who are very different from myself and the reality I knew. I had gained insight into new cultures, but I had also become inspired and motivated to learn more about them.

Fictional literature is more than just fiction. Stories about people and cultures that are different from our own provide a great window into worlds that are otherwise distant to us. The nature of stories is such that they often provide an alternative and more intimate way into a new culture than what factual texts can offer. This is the starting point for my thesis. I wanted to explore the following:

Short stories as a source of cultural insight in English: What possibilities and challenges can be encountered when working with short stories in a teaching context?

In order to answer this question I have done a close reading/analysis of three short stories from different parts of the world, written by three women of very diverse backgrounds. I

have analyzed certain aspects of the short stories with regard to the questions above, and investigated the relationship between narrative, culture and reader. In the following, I will give a brief explanation of my choice of short stories, and a presentation of some theories related to reading literature, before moving on to the analysis of the three short stories.

## 1.2 Choosing Short Stories

The choice of the short story as the literary genre for exploration of the questions posed in this thesis is not a random one. Neither is the selection of the short stories I have analyzed. Though the short story often has been viewed as an inferior genre to other literary forms, and has often been defined as a shorter, less accomplished version of the novel, it has come to be recognized as a genre in its own right, and as something more than a story which is short. In order to explain why the short story is a genre especially suited as a source of cultural insight in a teaching context, I shall give a very brief account of the development of short story theory, and how this form of literature is viewed today. Then the criteria for choosing the three particular short stories will be explained.

### 1.2.1 The genre

What is it that makes a short story more than a story which is simply short? Many attempts have been made at giving an answer to this question. Edgar Allan Poe was one of the first to write on the short story, and his pieces are basic to short story theory. His focus is on the unity of effect and that a story should “not exceed in length what might be perused in an hour” (Poe 1994, p. 60). “In the brief tale, however, the author is able to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (Poe 1994 p. 61). What he means by this, is that when reading a novel, the reader takes breaks, gets impressions from other parts of his/her life; there is what you might call interference. Whereas when reading a short story, the story is (mostly) the focus of attention from beginning to end. The unity of effect is achieved when the reader can dive into the universe of the story and stay there, uninterrupted, until the story is concluded.

Another classic in short story theory is American writer and educator Brander Matthews. In his 1901 article titled “The Philosophy of the Short –Story” he discusses the difference

between a novel and short story. He uses the hyphen and capital S to emphasize the difference between a true Short-story and a story that is simply short. He agrees with Poe that a Short-story has a unity of impression which a novel cannot have. He writes that “A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (Matthews 1994, p. 73).

Matthews claims that the short story writer has greater freedom as to choice of theme than the writer of a novel, but he does stress the need for a Short-story writer to be concise, original and have ingenuity and fantasy. Another difference between the novel and the Short-story, he claims, is the need to tell a story. He says a Short-story is nothing without a plot, whereas there are many examples of novels without a plot. He claims the purpose of the novel is often to give a personal impression of life, not so much to tell a story. The story itself, then, is at the heart of the short story, while story is of less significance in the novel. Matthews concludes that the Short-story is one of the few defined literary forms – a genre, and that the Short-story was developed long before the novel in the history of literature (Matthews 1994, p. 74).

There has been a lot of dissent as to how to define the short story and whether or not it is inferior to other literary forms. In more recent decades, however, there has been a shift towards recognition of the genre. There has also been a turn towards cognitive theories in defining the short story and how it is understood by readers.

Cognitive short story theory is linked with cognitive psychology. Studies of story comprehension have been done to find out how much knowledge a reader needs in order to understand stories and single parts of stories (e.g. at the sentence level). Terms like frame and script emerged from these studies, as well as links to traditional schema theory (Van Dijk 1994, p. 283).

What short story critics think of the genre is one thing, what writers themselves think, is another. One of the short stories included in this thesis is written by Nadine Gordimer, who has written an essay on what characterizes the genre. She compares the short story to the flash of fireflies, which, according to her is more true to human existence than the consistent nature of the novel:

Short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point... A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives. (Gordimer 1994, p. 265)

The aim of the short story, as well as the novel, is to communicate human experience (Gordimer 1994, p. 263). In real human experience, moments of truth come like flashes, in single moments, single situations. Another short story writer, Raymond Carver says almost the same thing: “First the glimpse. Then the glimpse given life, turned into something that illuminates the moment and may, if we're lucky – that word again – have even further-ranging consequences and meaning” (in May 1994, p. 277). This is what the short story by definition does; it gives us that one moment of revelation, of insight, without needing to explain the context.

What we can agree upon when discussing the short story is that it has a density and intensity that makes it necessary to read between the lines and it requires some effort to go underneath the surface to get to the meaning of the text. May (2002) writes that most short story critics have placed the short story closer to the lyric than to the narrative in the sense that it makes use of “metaphorically overdetermined language” (p. 114). My claim is that this makes it a highly relevant genre to use in the English classroom. Not only does this require close attention to language and interpretation, but it also necessitates reflection and search for meaning.



Another advantage of the genre is that it is by virtue an accessible genre. It is not a daunting task for a student to read a short story, and often the short story is short enough to read and discuss within the span of one session. There are, in other words, several features of the short story that makes it highly relevant for use in language education.

### **1.2.2 Criteria for choosing stories**

As for the choice of the particular short stories, there were several criteria. The stories had to be accessible to the kind of readership I had in mind in terms of teaching context – the 16-17 year-old Norwegian student. That means that the language could not pose too great a challenge, and the subject matter had to appear relevant and interesting for this age group. Further, I wanted the stories to represent cultures far removed from Norwegian culture, and to represent three different parts of the world. The stories had to be written by English-speaking writers, and represent cultures that are relevant for the English subject. The fact that all three authors are women is arbitrary.

The first of the stories analyzed is “The Ultimate Safari” by the South-African writer Nadine Gordimer. The story is part of the short story collection titled *Jump and Other Stories* published just prior to the announcement of her Nobel Prize in literature in 1991. The collection contains 16 stories, most of them set in a South-Africa plagued by apartheid. This particular story is set partly in Mozambique and partly in South-Africa, and tells of the journey of a young girl and her family through the Kruger National Park, fleeing civil war in their country.

The second story is “Tony’s Story” by Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko is a widely acclaimed Native American writer, who has written many short stories as well as poems and novels. “Tony’s Story” is set in a Native American reservation and describes a crime committed by two members of the tribe. The story reveals a lot about the Native tribe’s way of thinking, beliefs and the contrast between Native Americans and the majority culture of America.

The last story is written by a young Nigerian writer who has received much praise and also awards both for her novels and short stories. The story included in this thesis is the title story from the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, first published in 2009. It is about a young Nigerian woman, like the author herself, who goes to America to live with her uncle. Hoping to build a better life for herself, she meets an America very different from the stereotypical image of America she has heard of at home. She also faces the prejudice of American society.

The three authors come from very different backgrounds. They do, however, have one important thing in common. They have all lived their lives at the intersection between two cultures, and have experienced the friction and dynamics of what can occur when two cultures meet. Another thing the three have in common is a very conscious attitude to the role of literature and the potential of story and how stories can affect individuals and politics.

### 1.3 The role of literature in English teaching

Though it has not always been so, literature today has a significant role in the teaching of English in Norway. The English subject in Norway has gone through many stages of development, where different views of how to learn and what to learn were tried and tested. We have moved from a strict focus on language – grammar and translation in the early 1900s, to a communicative approach from the mid- 1970s, where it was seen as important to study language in a meaningful context (Simensen 1998, p. 64). With the emergence of communicative approaches to language teaching and learning, literature was also given a more central place, especially from the late 1980s/early 1990s. It was seen as important to provide the students with exposure to authentic language, where literary texts are considered authentic texts (Eikrem 1999, p. 21). Also, the view of language has changed to including more than just the purely linguistic aspects, but also the social and functional aspects of language, which, as I mentioned above, play an important role in communication. Literature came to be seen as a good tool in language education, exposing students to a lot of authentic language in context. “‘Roughly tuned’ language input through wide reading of literature has been accepted as a viable means to acquire a foreign language” (Ibsen 2000, p. 87).

Today, English is a broad subject that aims not only to teach students how to speak, read, listen and write in English, but also to develop cultural understanding, social skills and to encourage the students’ personal development. In the subject curriculum for English in K06, in the chapter about objectives we can read that in addition to language learning, English should contribute to giving insights into ways of life and cultures in English-speaking countries. Further, learning about English-speaking countries will give students a good basis for understanding the world around us. The development of communicative skills and cultural insight can contribute to greater cooperation, understanding and respect between people of different cultural backgrounds. It is also noted that literary texts in English can give lifelong joy of reading, and a deeper understanding of others and of ourselves, as well as inspire the students’ own creativity (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013).

Literature and culture, as we can clearly see, have been given a central place in the English curriculum. This is also reflected in the competence aims, where the section ‘culture, society and literature’ comprises one of the three parts that the plan is divided into. Some of the competence aims for upper secondary school (Common core subject VG1/VG2) are that students are expected to be able to:

Discuss and elaborate on culture and social conditions in several English-speaking countries”, “discuss and elaborate on different types of English language literary texts from different parts of the world” and “discuss and elaborate on texts by and about indigenous peoples in English-speaking countries.

(Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013)

The significant role that literature and culture have been given in the subject curriculum for English reflects a view of language as more than just a linguistic system, but as a system with social and cultural dimensions. In order to learn the language, to be able to understand and communicate efficiently, you have to understand the culture and social conditions. The role of literature in English teaching is both that of a great source of language – the more linguistic aspects, and as a source for learning about, understanding and discussing social and cultural issues.

## 1.4 Approaches to the reading of literature

In working with literature in the context of English teaching, there are some questions that are important to pose. How do we view the text itself? Do we see it as an entity with a set meanings, a container of meaning that students are to “collect” by reading it? Or do we see the text as open to all kinds of individual interpretations – or somewhere in between? Also, how do we see the role of the reader/student? Is the student actively processing the text by drawing on his/her own resources, placing the text in a context, taking into account both the historical and cultural context in which the text was produced and in which it is read? Or is the student more passively receiving the information that the text provides, reproducing “the right” reading taught by teachers? In the following I will present briefly some approaches to literature, which I will use in my discussion of the short stories in a teaching context in chapter 3.

Kathleen McCormick (1994) presents three different approaches to theories about reading; a cognitive, an expressivist and a social-cultural approach. There is not necessarily any opposition between these approaches, but they have different ways of seeing the role of reader, text and social context.

The first approach, or model, as McCormick terms it, is the cognitive model. In this model, the focus is to a large extent on reading comprehension, and the process of creating meaning from a text consists of adding up the meaning of words (McCormick 1994, p. 17). There is, however, also a branch within the cognitive approach that recognises the importance of the reader’s prior knowledge – schema theory. A schema is defined as a structure of knowledge that is based on a person’s experiences and knowledge, “a mental representation of experience which is typical for definite situations or circumstances” (Simensen 1998, p. 88). Schema theory is based on studies that show that our pre-existing information about a topic facilitates and influences our reading of a text. It is important, then, to provide the reader with the right schemata, or to activate the reader’s schemata before approaching the text, in order to be able to understand the meaning of the text he/she reads.

One problem with this approach has to do with the way knowledge and truth are perceived: “The cognitive tradition from which schema theory derives assumes that there is a universal foundation or ground which underlies knowledge, and which guarantees its truth or accuracy” (McCormick 1994, p. 18). Reading a text then, is about discovering its true meaning, and the prior knowledge that the reader brings to the text can aid or impair the “right” comprehension. However, schema theory recognises that different readers’ prior knowledge depends on many factors such as age, cultural background, education and so on, and that these differences mean that the readers will infer different things from the texts. It recognises that readers are active in reconstructing the meaning of the text based on their own backgrounds. But instead of accepting this fact, schema theorists often use this information to study what schemata are necessary for readers to have “in order to comprehend a text correctly” (McCormick 1994, p. 25). The aim then, for those who choose this approach, is to guide the student to what is seen as the one “correct” interpretation of a text.

At the other end of the scale we find the expressivist approaches to reading. The expressivist model has a different take on both text and reader. It does not consider the reader’s task as primarily to discover the “right meaning” in a text, but to create their own meaning in the text based on their own personal, subjective understanding of it. This approach also recognises the importance of the students’ cultural context, but rather than seeing it as important to give the students the right cultural knowledge, as in the cognitive model, it recognises the individuality and heterogeneity of students’ backgrounds and that these differences will account for students finding different meanings in texts. In fact, individual and authentic responses to texts are encouraged (McCormick 1994, p. 30).

Out of the expressivist approach came the reader-response movement in the 1970s, which had great influence on the teaching of literature in American high schools and universities. Reader-response critics saw the reader as active, and did not see the text as an “objective container of meaning” (McCormick 1994, p. 37). But according to McCormick, they failed to explain what the text actually was. In spite of this, reader-response critics brought about

changes to teaching practices in America. From a traditional way of teaching literature, where the teacher guided the students to a “correct” reading, the movement has been towards reading literature from a reader-response perspective, encouraging students to find their own meaning in texts, and to “integrate them into their own worlds and experiences and truly begin to make them come alive” (McCormick 1994, p. 38). The pedagogical technique of the response statement, which is a text where students express their feelings, memories, thoughts or associations after reading a literary text, was developed within this movement, and this technique made its way into American classrooms, as well as Norwegian ones.

Though making many valid points, and having had great influence in the way literature has been taught, McCormick sees the expressivist approach as flawed in some fundamental ways; the expressivists fail to bring to the table a new theory of the text that can replace the idea of the text as a container of meaning. Also, their individualistic approach fails to take into account that individuals are social subjects as well, and that social conditions influence how they respond to a text. She sees the solution to these flaws in what she terms “the social-cultural model”.

The social-cultural model is based on the idea of literacy as a social process. Within this approach, the idea of being critically literate was developed. To be critically literate is more complex than the type of literacy focused on in the two previously presented approaches, where the focus was on comprehension and on subjective response to a text; “to be a critically literate reader is to have the knowledge and ability to perceive the interconnectedness of social conditions and practices, and to possess the critical and political awareness to take action with and against them” (McCormick, p. 49). Both the context of the text and the context of the reader is seen as crucially important here, and it focuses on how the reader understands both the text and the historical context of which the text is a product, and how he/she understands his/her own context as a reader, as a subject in a particular historical setting. As in the expressivist approach, the social-cultural approach sees the reader as active in the construction of meaning, “not as a free individual, but as a subject in history who nonetheless possesses some degree of agency” (McCormick, p. 57). This

approach, then, can be said to incorporate both the expressivist and the cognitive approaches, and is the approach I have chosen when discussing the short stories in a teaching context.



## 1.5 What is culture, and how does it relate to narrative?

When working with questions of the relationship between culture and literature, it is useful to have a definition of culture in mind. Culture can be defined as “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society” (Barker 2003, p. 7, quotation from S. Hall). What culture is concerned with is how we make sense of the world, and meanings are generated through different signs, of which language is the most important signifying system. Studies of language and stories are therefore of great importance in culture studies. Barker (2003) writes that: “Narratives offer us frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the social order is constructed” (p. 28). If we want to learn something about the norms, values and customs of a society, stories can help us understand how that particular society makes sense of the world and create meaning through language and narratives.

When analysing the short stories, I shall be looking at what the stories reveal about the practices, representations and customs of the societies the stories emerged from. Narrative theory provides tools that enable us to look at how culture is represented in a text. Choices made in relation to for example narration and time and space are often reflections of the explicit and implicit cultural issues the text deals with, and can reveal something about values and ways of seeing the world of both the world of the text itself, and the cultural formation from which the narrative emerged.

## 1.6 The Structure of the Thesis

In the introduction to this thesis, I have briefly presented short story theory, and the short stories I will be analysing. I have also presented some different approaches to the reading of literature, and looked at what role literature has played and plays today in English teaching in upper secondary school in Norway. In the following, the thesis is divided into two main parts: the analysis of the short stories, and the discussion of the stories in a teaching context. The analysis of the three short stories is focused on the literary aspects that I have found to be most relevant in terms of answering the thesis statement. I shall be looking into themes, narrative devices such as the choice of narrator, symbolism, time and space, and also at the social and historical context of each of the stories. I shall also be discussing the advantages and challenges of using each particular story in a teaching situation.

In chapter 3 I will discuss the more general challenges and possibilities of using short stories as a way of gaining cultural insight and knowledge, drawing on examples from the stories I have analysed. My focus will be on theory of reading, based on the social-cultural approach as presented by McCormick (1994). I will also discuss how short stories provide different kinds of insights than factual texts.

## 2. Analysis of Three Short Stories

### 2.1 “The Ultimate Safari” by Nadine Gordimer

#### 2.1.1 About the Author

Nadine Gordimer was born in South Africa in 1923 to Jewish parents. She was home schooled for much of her childhood, and started writing and publishing fiction at an early age. Growing up during the time of apartheid and seeing the injustice of South African society, she became deeply involved with the struggle against the system, both through her fiction and her involvement in the political struggle of the anti-apartheid movement. Nadine Gordimer’s bibliography consists of a long list of novels and short story collections. She writes about the South African and African experience, about the relationship between whites and blacks, political and moral issues such as racism, and through her literature, she sought to tell the truth about the societies she described; “only a try for the truth makes sense of being, only a try for the truth edges towards justice...” (Gordimer 1991b, last para.).

In 1991, the Nobel Prize in Literature was received by Gordimer, "who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity" (Nobelprize.org, n.d.). The prize was awarded to her in a turbulent time for South Africa, As Per Wästberg puts it: “Gordimer’s Nobel Prize put the searchlight on a country in painful transition from an oppressive racism to a turbulent democracy” (2001). There is little doubt that Nadine Gordimer’s stories and novels have helped raise awareness in the world and have given people a deeper understanding of the oppressive regime. Since her literature is concerned with such social and cultural issues it is very relevant in light of the aims of this thesis. Gordimer’s stories give students a window into South African history and society, as well as into more general social and cultural issues that are relevant across the world.

### 2.1.2 About the Short Story

The same year as she received the Nobel Prize, “The Ultimate Safari” was published in the short story collection *Jump, and Other Stories* (1991). This short story is about a family forced to flee their home due to war and it portrays their journey through the Kruger National park, and how they arrive at a refugee camp at the end of the journey. The narrative devices Nadine Gordimer has employed in the telling of the story, allow us to gain insight into and understanding of the experiences the characters go through, and on a more general level, into aspects of human experience that we might or might not be familiar with. In the following I will give a brief summary, before moving on to an analysis of the short story. The aim of the analysis is to show how the themes are brought forth through the narrative and to investigate what cultural knowledge and insight can be gained from reading it. Further, there will be a discussion of what challenges and possibilities the story poses in an educational context.

To give a brief summary of the plot of the story, we are, at the beginning of the story, introduced to a group of children who seem to have lost their mother and father. The father is “fighting in the war” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 33), and the mother never came home after a trip to a shop. After staying alone at their house waiting for a while, the children’s grandparents arrive. They have heard from villagers that the children were on their own, and came to take them back to their own home. After futile searches for the children’s mother and for food to eat, they decide they have to “go away” (p. 35) – flee their home and country. So along with people from another village they start the journey, with a man who is to guide them through the Kruger National Park, which they have to cross in order to get to their destination. The journey through the National Park is difficult and perilous. There are wild animals, no food, and they have to make sure to stay clear of the roads and camps where white people come for their safari holidays. On one occasion they eat some wild fruit that makes them sick to the stomach. The grandfather gets very sick from the fruit, and goes off to be on his own with his troubled stomach. He gets lost in the tall grass, and they never find him again. Forced to move on without their grandfather, the children and the grandmother make it out of the Park; they are finally “away”. There is a big tent and a clinic – a refugee camp. The children are extremely tired and ill after their strenuous journey, and receive medical attention at the camp. They get to go to school in the village, and stay there for a long time,

presumably years, living alongside other families in the big tent. One day a team of film makers arrive at the camp and interview the grandmother. When asked about her plans for returning to her home, she tells the film makers that there is no home any more, nothing to go back for. The child, who is the narrator of the story, reveals her hopes for the future – hoping to go home one day and find her mother and grandfather.

The themes of “The Ultimate Safari” are ones that can be found in many of Nadine Gordimer’s stories. Racial issues are an ever-present theme, seen for instance through the use of ‘safari’ as a metaphor, highlighting the different conditions and opportunities white and black people are faced with. The effect of war on families and individuals is also a central theme, and how individuals often become powerless victims of historical and political circumstance. Parts of the story can also be read as a comment on the effect of colonialism in Africa. These are some of the most obvious themes in the story, though issues of gender, education and of hope and optimism can also be found.

### 2.1.3 Setting and Historical Context

In most of her fiction Nadine Gordimer writes about South African society. The setting of “The Ultimate Safari” is partly in Mozambique, partly in South Africa. It is not until the very last part of the story that the refugees’ country of origin is revealed; meanwhile the reader might have made some qualified guesses. What we initially learn about the setting is that it is in a village, during a war, and it is in a region of poverty. When the plan of their flight is revealed to go through the Kruger Park, we get a clearer picture of where we are, even if we have never heard of the park; “We knew about the Kruger Park. A kind of whole country of animals – elephants, lions, jackals, hyenas, hippos, crocodiles, all kinds of animals. We had some of them in our own country, before the war...” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 36). This tells us that we are in Africa, and that we are in a different country than the one where the Kruger Park is located (South Africa).

Towards the very end of the story we learn which country they came from, when the news team that came to the refugee camp asked them: “Do you hope to go back to Mozambique – to your own country?”(p. 46). This tells us that the refugees went southeast, fleeing from a war in Mozambique, through the Kruger National Park, into South Africa, where they found shelter in a refugee camp. Knowing this, we can make some assumptions about the time, and what war they were fleeing from. The civil war in Mozambique started two years after the country gained its independence in 1977, and raged on until 1992, the year after *Jump and other stories* was published. The Mozambican government forces were fighting the resistance movement, RENAMO, which received funding from, amongst other countries, South Africa. This civil war was long, devastating for the country, and claimed over one million victims, killed in battle or from starvation. Another five million people had to flee their homes, just like the family we meet in “The Ultimate Safari”.

It is also of great symbolic significance that the bulk of the narrative takes place in the Kruger National Park. The Park is marketed as “a wildlife sanctuary like no other, its atmosphere so unique that it allows those who enter its vastness to immerse themselves in

the unpredictability and endless wilderness that is the true quality of Africa” (SA-Venues, n.d., first para.). The publicly accepted history of the park states that it was named after Paul Kruger, the President of the Transvaal Republic, to commemorate his efforts towards nature conservation and his struggle to found the national park. However, there are those who claim that this was a myth constructed to advance “Afrikaner Nationalist political purposes” and “republican and apartheid ideology” (Carruthers 1994, p. 263). In any case, it is clear that the park was not established for the black people of the region. It was a sanctuary for animals, in a country where black people found no sanctuary, and a place for white tourists to come and luxuriate.

With this in mind, it is easy to see “The Ultimate Safari” both as a commentary on how innocent people are affected by war, but also as a sharp criticism of the South African regime and its support of the resistance movement in Mozambique. In fact, a lot of Nadine Gordimer’s fiction can be read as criticism of the South African government. Because of the oppressiveness of the regime and lack of freedom of speech however, the criticism was never obvious or overt. There is no overt criticism of South Africa in this story either, but it seems clear that the choice of setting was consciously made to raise awareness in the public about what the civil war was doing to the civilians in Mozambique, and perhaps also, to assert political influence.

### 2.1.4 Narrator

The writer of any story needs to have a way of telling that story, an “instrument that the author uses to present and develop the text” (Lothe 2000, p. 20). The narrator functions as this kind of instrument, and is the one who tells the story, the one whose eyes we see the story developed through. The narrator can be an active part of the action in the story, or a passive observer. In either case, the choice of narrator has a profound effect on the way the reader perceives the story. The narrator can be first person or third person, and can be more or less active in the events in the story.

In “The Ultimate Safari” Gordimer has chosen to give a voice to someone whose voice is not usually heard: a little black African girl in the midst of a war. It is clear early on that it is narrated in the first person, and that the I-voice is someone who is relating events in which she has been an active part. The reader does not get to know a lot about the I-character explicitly, though she does reveal about herself that she is a girl and her place in the group of siblings; “I am the middle one, the girl...” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 34). Through the narrative, this girl tells the story of the family’s journey from her perspective, giving us glimpses of her inner thoughts and feelings as well as reporting the events that develop through the story.

The choice of a child narrator is reflected in the language on the story. The story is told in a simple, straightforward way, without difficult words and expressions, and often with very short sentences; “perhaps she met the bandits” (p. 33), “We wanted to go where there were no bandits and there was food” (p. 35). It is also striking that there is no analysis or reflections on the situation they are in, no reflections on reasons for the war, just a simple stating of the facts as a child would see them; “The people my father was fighting –the bandits, they are called by our government –ran all over the place and we ran away from them like chickens chased by dogs” (p. 33).

A child’s understanding of a war is, of course, different than that of an adult. What the child tells us of the war is that there is the government fighting the ‘bandits’, and the narrator offers no insight into what they are fighting over, or analysis of the consequences of the war,



other than reporting her story and showing us the impact that war has had on her and her family. Thus the focus in this story is not on the war itself, but how war and violence change the lives of individuals and families.

Though the story is narrated by an I-voice, the use of the personal pronoun “we” is used extensively throughout the story; “We were in the war, too...”; “we were frightened” (p.33). The narrator closely identifies herself as a part of a group – her family, and it is *their* story, not primarily *her* story, which is told. This sense of community is important in relation to theme and signifies that it is not primarily the narrator’s individual story which is told – it is the story of a people.

There is also an affective dimension to the choice of a child narrator. It is easy to sympathise and feel a child’s story, perhaps more so than with an adult. This child has her whole life ahead of her, and we want things to work out for her. We want there to be hope. Had the story been told by the grandmother, it might change the optimism that can be seen in the story, in the midst of all the hopelessness. As the ending shows, the grandmother has lost hope for the future, but the child has not. The grandmother answers, at being asked about her hopes for the future: “Nothing. I’m here”. The girl, on the other hand, is certain she will return to her home: “I’ll go back.” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 46). It is, perhaps, this girl’s hopes for the future that we are left sympathising with and perhaps also believing in. The story ends on an optimistic note.

It is a paradox, however, that an elderly white writer takes on the voice of a black child. This is not the first time that Gordimer employs a black narrator (see e.g. the short story “Some Monday for Sure” from 1976), but it is something for which she has been criticised and questioned. Some critics have claimed that “it is presumptuous of her to attempt representations of that which she cannot possibly know, and that such depictions bear the mark of inauthenticity” (Lazar 1992, p. 790). Gordimer’s own defence of this criticism is that she has lived “next to” blacks for so many years that she knows enough to write black

characters and narrators: “If I write about blacks I feel I have the right to do so. I know enough to do so” (as quoted in Lazar 1992, p. 791).

The questioning of the white writer/black narrator paradox is perhaps valid in some ways. Writing in the voice of someone very different from you, such as illiterate black characters or children, is a challenging undertaking even if you do have a lot of knowledge and empathy. However, if this is problematic, the same claim of unauthenticity can be made about any author who writes in the voice of someone whose experience he/she has not been through. This is a very limiting restriction to place on writers. Besides, as mentioned above, this short story gives voice to someone whose voice is not usually heard, even if it is just the voice of a character in a story, not a real person.

Narrator, author and language are things that the teacher should guide the students’ attention to after reading this short story. It would be a useful task for the students to reflect on and discuss whether the white author/black narrator relationship is problematic, and whether it makes the text less authentic and believable. This may provide some insight into the role of literature, and help develop the critical literacy of the students.

### 2.1.5 Time/tense

The story is told in the past tense, until we get to the last part of the narrative. Here, the tense changes to present, revealing the fact that this story is told in retrospect, approximately two years after the trek through the park actually happened; “Now that we’ve been in the tent so long – I have turned eleven and my brother is nearly three...” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 44). For the reader, this information gives a sense of relief – they made it through the park and are doing all right. At the same time, it is disheartening to learn they have been in a refugee camp, living in a tent for two years. This shift in tense gives perspective to the story. It shows how the political and social situation in a country/region not only creates a dramatic situation for civilians, but how it permanently changes their lives. There is an interplay between pessimism and optimism in the story, both in how the family made it through an extreme situation, to end up in a refugee camp, but also in the prospects for the future. Both past, present and future tense are represented in this story.

The passage of time is somewhat unclear here. We do not know how long it took them to walk through the park. There is nothing to indicate whether it took days, weeks, maybe even months, though we can assume that it took quite a lot more than a few days, given the state of total exhaustion and illness of the children when they arrived at the refugee camp. Not giving the reader a clear idea of the passage of time probably reflects the state of mind of the characters in the story during their journey.

## 2.1.6 Symbolism

The Ultimate Safari starts with a travel ad that reads:

*The African Adventure Lives On... You can do it!*

*The ultimate safari or expedition*

*With leaders who know Africa*

- TRAVEL ADVERTISEMENT

*Observer, LONDON, 27/11/88*

(Gordimer 1991a, p. 31)

Starting the story off with this advertisement creates expectations in the reader that it is a completely different kind of journey that we will be reading about. Images of Jeeps, exotic African animals and adventure come to mind. The people we expect to be making the journey, to go on safari, are white, well-off Europeans in search of an adventure, safely guided by people who will protect them from the dangers of predators. Juxtaposing this image with the images we are left with after reading the story about the African family on this “ultimate safari”, leaves a powerful impression. It allows us to see clearly the ridiculous differences between the privileged whites and the impoverished and hunted black Africans. In such proximity of each other in time and space within the Kruger Park, the refugees and the tourists are a world apart, never getting within eyesight of one another.

The symbolism in this story is quite significant from a cultural point of view. Throughout the story there is quite extensive use of animal metaphors, comparing the refugees on their way through the park to animals. The metaphors reflect the situation they are in; in the part of the story where they are still in the village, she compares the way they run from the ‘bandits’ “like chickens chased by dogs” (Gordimer 1991a, p. 33). Further on, the baby brother is compared to a “baby monkey” the way he clings around his sister’s waist. When venturing into the Kruger Park, the guide says that they “must move like animals among the animals, away from the roads, away from the white people’s camps” (p. 37). Later, the guide told them that if the Africans working for the white people at the safari camp sees them, “all they could do was pretend we were not there; they had seen only animals” (p. 39).

There are many references to lions, elephants and other typical animals that white tourists come to Africa to see. This gives the journey that these refugees take a flavour of an actual safari, though from a completely different angle than your typical safari, where you would safely observe the animals from a Jeep, at a comfortable distance. During the ‘safari’ that these refugees take, they experience close, and potentially dangerous, encounters with elephants and lions. Also, there are several references to how the animals are eating, and that the refugees do not have anything to eat. The animals are much better off than the human beings in this story, enjoying good access to food, a chance to lie down and rest and even their own country; the narrator refers to the Kruger Park as “A kind of whole country of animals” (p. 36).

These metaphors and comparisons are a clear comment on how these African refugees were treated and viewed; like animals or even lower than the animals. White people came to see the animals in their habitats, while the refugees must make sure they are not seen by the tourists. The white tourists have not paid to come and see victims of war and poverty. The white privileged people seek the exotic, but not if it makes them feel uncomfortable and guilty about the cost of their own lifestyle.

The use of animal imagery and references to animal life in the Kruger Park are effective in showing the contrast between the privileged whites and the black refugees. The difference between the journey or “safari” which the refugees are taking, could hardly be further from the safari of the white tourists. Placing them so close to each other in geographical space, makes this contrast even clearer and leaves an even stronger impression; they are so close to the tourist camps that they could “see the fires where the white people were cooking in the camps and we could smell the smoke and the meat” (p. 36). This seems to us as readers utterly unjust and incomprehensible, and gives us a real distaste for this separation between the privileged and those who have nothing and at the same time are in such difficult circumstances.

### 2.1.7 Teaching “The Ultimate Safari”

What is it that makes this story both relevant and interesting for students in upper secondary school in Norway, and that makes it a great source for cultural and social knowledge and understanding?

First of all, this story is appropriate not only in subject matter/theme, but also for its relative linguistic simplicity. Narrated by a young girl, the language in this story reflects the girl’s maturity and linguistic competence. The sentences are not very complex, and the vocabulary relatively simple. Most of the words in this story should be recognisable to Norwegian students aged 16-17, with the exception, perhaps, of a few words such as “mealies”. This story, then, is a good example of acknowledged literature that is not too challenging for the age group. The narrative is also fairly easy to understand, and most students should be able to grasp the gist of it.

Simensen (1998) distinguishes between three levels of text comprehension in reading:

- 1) An understanding of the surface meanings of the text, the plain or factual sense of the text
- 2) An understanding of implications and ‘between-the-lines’ meaning, and
- 3) An understanding which makes it possible to evaluate the text on the basis of personal knowledge and experience

Relating these levels to “The Ultimate Safari”, it seems that a reading of the story on any of these levels can give something to the reader in terms of cultural knowledge or understanding. On level 1) the reader will understand that the story is about a family having to flee from war, and that they end up in a refugee camp, and will understand the hardship that the family go through on their way through the Kruger Camp. On level 2) students will be able to, on their own or with guidance from the teacher, analyse and reflect on the things that might not be obvious on the surface level. They can discuss the themes of the story, analyse characters, the relationship between them, identify and analyse metaphors and point of view. On level 3) the students will be able to use the knowledge they already possess, such as knowledge about the geography and history of South Africa/Mozambique, and their personal values and interests to place the text in a wider context. They can for instance use

the text as a starting point for discussing racism or human rights, or as an inspiration to learn more about the historical circumstances of the text.

A reading of this text on any level can help bring students to understand how war affects innocent people. It shows a very realistic example of what refugees, victims of war, have to go through to get to safety. This is a highly relevant topic not only for discussing conditions in other countries, but can also contribute to a greater understanding for the trials that many refugees coming to our own country have gone through. Another thing that students can draw from this text is perspectives on how cultures practice the relative value of some human lives as compared to others.

Many English text-books provide chapters about South-Africa, and since South Africa is an important English speaking country, it is expected that the students know something about the history and social conditions of this country. Some text-books deal with South Africa as a tourist destination, and talk about the Kruger National Park. Learning about this destination as a place to go on a traditional tourist safari might be a good introductory activity to reading “The Ultimate Safari”, making the contrast between the tourist safari and the refugees’ safari even clearer. Or the story could serve as a starting point for learning more about the Kruger Park, the geography and history of the area.

Many text-books and teachers also teach the dark history of South Africa; apartheid. Though “The Ultimate Safari” is not mainly about South Africa and apartheid, it provides a good window into this topic. One of the themes in “The Ultimate Safari” is the separation between blacks and whites, and discussing how this is shown in the story might help the students understand better how the apartheid system worked, what values it was based on, and what consequences it had. Another issue that could be discussed and reflected upon is freedom of speech. What conditions were there for political opinion and expression your views under the apartheid regime? Why could Nadine Gordimer not state her opinions openly, instead of/in addition to “disguising” them as narratives and metaphors? These are questions that the story opens up for, and that would be relevant for students to discuss.

How thorough should a teacher expect the students to be in their analysis of the story in order to understand and achieve increased knowledge and insight into the culture and history of this region? Analysing and discussing the effects of the choice of narrator can help bring the students' attention to the themes of power, voice and truth. Understanding some of the metaphors can help the students see the political issues and the contrast between white and privileged/black and victimized which is highlighted in this story. In my experience, students find literary analysis challenging, but with a little guidance from the teacher, perhaps having some of the metaphors pointed out to them, or being guided by specific questions posed by the teacher, they might find they are enlightened and inspired to go further in their analysis and look for meaning beneath the surface. Hopefully, they will eventually be able to go to level three in their text comprehension, being able to add to their understanding of the text their own perspectives, experiences and evaluations.

Another central question when working with literature is how much context the teacher should provide, and when. Should the teacher give an introduction to South-African society and history, or information about the war in Mozambique, before reading the story? Or should the story be allowed to speak for itself? Too much "context" or information from the teacher in advance might get in the way of students reading the text independently, forming their own individual meaning from the text. As for this specific story, it is not necessary for the understanding of the text to have any pre-existing knowledge of the history or social conditions of the story. But in order to go deeper into the text and understand the full range of the metaphors, contrast and the political and historical implications of the themes, it is necessary to have some background knowledge. This can, however, be provided after a reading, as a starting point for further analysis and discussion.



### 2.1.8 Summing up

What cultural insight and knowledge can be had from reading and working with “The Ultimate Safari”? For one, it can give some insight into a specific historical event or situation – the war in Mozambique and the apartheid regime. It can also provide some knowledge of a geographical area. What the story offers most of all is perhaps insight into what it means to be a victim of war and politics, and to highlight the contrast between those in power and those who are powerless. On a greater scale, the story can also serve as a starting point for gaining more knowledge and understanding of the effects of colonialism. This makes the story highly relevant, not only for students of English, but also for other subjects such as history and social studies.

“The Ultimate Safari” is a story which is linguistically simple, and should be understood on some level by most students in upper secondary school. It does, however, offer insight into some complex issues, that might prove challenging to all students. It is important for the teacher to supply the students with the right analytical tools and enough background information to be able to get a grasp of the cultural and political issues the story deals with.

## 2.2 “Tony’s Story” by Leslie Marmon Silko

### 2.2.1 About the author

Leslie Marmon Silko, born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1948, is a Native American writer who has published numerous novels and short stories. She has won much acclaim for her storytelling abilities, and is one of the most esteemed Native American writers of our time. She descends from a long line of storytellers, being born and raised in the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico.

Storytelling, according to Leslie Marmon Silko, is essential in human language. In a revised version of her book *Storyteller*, she has included an introduction where she explains her ideas about storytelling, both generally as an important part of human existence and specifically as an important part of Native American culture. Storytelling, she says, is a means of exchanging important information that will help the listeners develop survival strategies “to learn to anticipate the many threats and dangers in their world” (Silko 2012, p. XVIII). Storytelling also serves an important function in expressing dreams and spirituality, and in preserving and passing on tradition and culture. Of her own native people, the Pueblo people, she writes:

The entire culture, all the knowledge, experience and beliefs, were kept in the human memory of the Pueblo people in the form of narratives that were told and retold from generation to generation. The people perceived themselves in the world as part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories. (Silko 2012, p. XIX)

Leslie Marmon Silko grew up hearing the old stories of the Laguna Pueblo, both the children’s stories where magical things happened, and about the history of her people and of historical events that took place in the area. During the time she grew up, the US authorities were still suppressing Native American culture, language and religion. Her family members spoke English to her, to keep her from getting into trouble with the authorities, and at school

she could be punished for speaking the Laguna language. There were, however, family members such as her grandfather and aunts, who told the children stories, including parts and songs that were in the Laguna language, and these stories were very important to her; “So from the time I was five years old, the stories were my link, my lifeline with the Laguna language and culture” (Silko 2012, p. XXIV). The stories of her childhood had a great impact not only on her own identity, but also on her own storytelling in the form of novels, short stories and poetry.

Even though she is part white, the preservation of Native American culture, language, tradition and belief is important to Leslie Marmon Silko, and she has a great commitment to the rights of the native people. Believing that the political and legal system would not be a sufficient tool, she decided that writing would be a better way for her to make her opinions heard. She said in an interview that “the most effective political statement I could make is in my art work” (Arnold 2000, p. VIII).

In an interview with Per Seyersted in 1976, the same year she published her novel *Ceremony*, and the same year as the bicentennial of the US Constitution, she makes it clear that in her opinion, the land, the resources, everything that the great nation of the USA was built on, was stolen from the Native Americans, and that the American people should be reminded of this; “As long as this fact is acknowledged, then I’ll be satisfied, and they can celebrate all they have done with this stolen land and the stolen resources and they can pat themselves on the back for the achievement” (Seyersted 2000, p. 8). These political views might seem slightly paradoxical, given her family background, though being from such a multi-cultural family might have made her especially sensitive to these issues; “Because our family was such a mixture of Indian, Mexican, and white, I was acutely aware of the inherent conflicts between Indian and white, old-time beliefs and Christianity” (Silko 1996, p. 17).

## 2.2.2 About “Tony’s Story”

Leslie Marmon Silko’s short story called “Tony’s Story” was first published while she was still in college, in 1969. It is also included in her collection of stories, poems and photographs, *Storyteller* (1981/2012). This collection consists of short stories written at different times in Silko’s career, as well as poems and old family photographs, many of them shot by Silko’s father. The collection is very clearly influenced by the storytelling traditions of her family and culture, and the stories and poems are to a large extent based on tales told to Silko by her aunt and grandmother when she was a child.

“Tony’s Story” revolves around an incident where a state policeman gets shot and killed, and it reveals the cultural differences between a Native American way of thinking and a western way of thinking. It is the story of two Native American men who, after being harassed and followed by a state policeman, end up killing him and burning his body. The story brings up several cultural and social issues, and reveals quite a bit about the Pueblo Natives’ way of thinking about the world.

“Tony’s Story” has been included in Norwegian textbooks for English in upper secondary school, such as *Passage* (2009) from Cappelen Damm, and is presumably read and taught in many English classrooms across the country.

In this chapter I will analyse certain aspects of the short story with regard to what it might offer in terms of insight into cultural and social issues. Some of these aspects are the relationship between fiction and reality, the role of witchcraft in the story and in Pueblo culture, and the relationship between Native Americans and white society. I will also discuss didactical issues related to these aspects of the short story.

### 2.2.3 Characters and narration

There are three main characters in the story, and these three characters represent three very different cultural points of view. Tony is the Native who has stayed on the reservation, still speaks the native language, and who believes in the ancient myths and stories. His actions, thoughts and dreams clearly show this. He refers to “stories about witches” and “the stories that old Teofilo told” (Silko 2012, p. 117), which are his source of life wisdom and knowledge. He also gives Leon an arrowhead on a piece of string to wear for protection, something that clearly shows his beliefs. Tony is also very aware of and concerned with the landscape and nature around him, and refers continually to the moon, the sky, the weather, the fields, the mountains and so on.

Leon is a different kind of character. Though also Native, and from the same place as Tony, he has been away for some time, in the army. This has changed his outlook on things, he seems to have removed himself from the Native culture in which he grew up and become more like the average white American. Tony says when he meets him that “He grabbed my hand and held it tight like a white man” (Silko 2012, p. 116). He also believes more in the protective power of guns than arrowheads on a piece of string. He does not understand at all why Tony kills the policeman in the end: “My God, Tony. What’s wrong with you?” (p. 121).

The third character is the policeman. We do not get to know the policeman in any detail. There is a bit of mystery surrounding him; he always wears dark sun glasses, so that they cannot see his eyes. Also, he does not explain why he hit Leon in the face the first time they encountered him. We do, however, get more of an explanation later, when it is indicated that he has done similar things before, and that he has issues with Native Americans. From the actions and speech of the policeman we infer that he has had trouble with natives before, seemingly because he has a racist orientation and seems to hunt down Native Americans almost like they were animals. Another explanation, from the point of view of Tony, is that he in fact is a witch, not an actual human being, and that “it” needs to be killed and burned.

All these three characters are crucially important to the story, and show us three different perspectives. The way the policeman acts does not get our sympathy, still he is the victim. From quite early in the story, we can predict something like this happening, though most likely with Leon as the killer. The fact that Tony is the one to shoot him, takes us by surprise.

As the title suggests, the narrator of the story is Tony – it is Tony’s story that is being told. The narrator first gets identified in the first paragraph, when Tony’s friend Leon yells at him: “Hey Tony – over here!” (Silko 2012, p. 116). Later on, the reader is informed that his full name is Antonio Sousea. The choice of narrator in this short story, as in Gordimer’s “Ultimate Safari”, is of great significance for getting the themes across. Being granted access to Tony’s thoughts, feelings and dreams is crucial for understanding why Tony shot the policeman. For someone unfamiliar with, or even for someone who is familiar with, but no longer believes in the ancient stories, myths and magical beliefs of the Natives, like Leon, his actions seem incomprehensible and irrational. The story told from Leon’s perspective would have been an entirely different one.

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## 2.2.4 Witchery

An important premise in “Tony’s Story” is Tony’s belief that the state police officer is a witch. This view of witches and witchery in Silko’s text is different from the western stories of witchery that Norwegian students will be familiar with, and far removed from western realism. To fully understand this element of the story, it is crucial to have some insight into the role of witches and witchery in Native American culture. In Silko’s stories and novels such as *Ceremony*, there are a lot of references to witchery. According to Avila (2008), witchery to the Native Americans is “dedicated to robbing the earth of its life force... In the Native American view, witches are those who intentionally do harm to others through destruction of the natural world” (p. 54). The witches, then, possess powers that bring disorder, death and destruction. Witchery is also often connected with the culture of the Europeans who came to America and wreaked havoc on the natural world and on the culture of the Native Americans. The police officer is a representative of the white culture, and also, in Tony’s view, of the destructive power of witchery. To Pueblo Indians there is a link between witchcraft, immorality and misuse of power. A witch will possess “traits that people consider antisocial: envy, jealousy, revenge, quarrelsomeness...” (Ruoff 1978, p. 5). These are traits that we can recognise in the description of the police officer in “Tony’s Story”. The policeman’s misuse of power in his encounters with Leon and Tony is also a clear indication of witchery.

The first mention of witches in the story, is the night of their first encounter with the state policeman. When Tony comes home that night, he has an uneasy feeling, and he says that “the stories about witches ran with me” (Silko 2012, p. 117). The stories Tony is referring to here would have been passed on from generation to generation within the Pueblo culture. These are stories that Tony would have heard again and again as he was growing up and that have been crucial to the survival of the Pueblo people and culture. This was the way that knowledge and belief were passed down and recorded in the collective memory of the people, and these stories are seen to be part of “an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories” (Silko 1996, p. 31). Knowing the tales and being able to pass them on, is crucial to the survival of the culture and belief system of the Pueblo

people. While Leon has been removed from his roots, and no longer remembers the old stories, Tony, as everyone else who knows the stories, plays an important part in continuing the ancient tale and keeping it alive.

In the same passage, Tony tells us about the dream he has that night: “—the big cop was pointing a long bone at me – they always use human bones, and the whiteness flashed silver in the moonlight where he stood” (Silko 2012, p. 117). The long bone is reminiscent of a policeman’s baton, and though the police officer in the dream was faceless, the real one wore dark glasses, and they could not see his eyes. This dream convinces Tony that the police officer is really a witch, and from now on, there is a new level of fear for him when they encounter him again. Silko’s choice to use a dream as a tool to make clear Tony’s belief in witchcraft is not a random one. It also tells us something about how witchcraft was traditionally identified in Pueblo culture; “Tony’s dream serves as a form of clairvoyance, a technique used by many pueblo tribes for detecting witchcraft” (Ruoff 1978, p. 6). To Tony, the dream serves as a confirmation of his suspicions.

The next time Leon and Tony are out driving, Tony has a revelation, or what we can call an epiphany; he looks at the landscape and the “wilted fields of corn” “and then I knew why the drought had come that summer” (Silko 2012, p. 118). He does not explain this, but it will become clear at the end of the story that he is referring to the state policeman, who is in his eyes the witch, as the cause of the drought. Right after his revelation, the two men discover that the cop is in the car behind them. Tony’s description of the image of the police officer in the rear view mirror points back to his dream: “I could make out the dark image of a man, but where the face should have been there were only the silvery lenses of the dark glasses he wore” (p. 118).

The conversation between Leon and Tony in the car after this second encounter reveals the differences in outlook and world view of the two. Leon is focused on their rights: “we’ve got a right to be on this highway” (p. 119). Tony, on the other hand, knows that rights do not matter to the cop “because it wasn’t ‘rights’ that he was after, but Leon didn’t seem to



understand; he couldn't remember the stories that old Teofilo told" (p. 119). Tony is still deeply rooted in the Native American culture where story and myth are part of reality, while Leon has become "westernized" through his time away from the reservation, and is thus more concerned with the laws and rights of western society.

That night when Tony comes home to his family, he decides not to say anything about what has happened. He does not want to worry his family, and besides, talking about it would make it worse; "I knew the cop was something terrible, and even to speak about it risked bringing it close to all of us" (p. 119). Leon, concerned with rights, speaks with the Governor about it, who promises to bring it up with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Leon also decides to bring a gun with him whenever he goes out driving. Tony is concerned about the power of the gun over witchery: "But you can't be sure that it will kill one of them" (p. 119).

It turns out that the gun is powerful enough, however. In the last part of the story, Tony ends up shooting and killing the state police officer. He keeps referring to him as "it", not "he", and Tony, not Leon, shoots him after he has threatened them with his billy club. They place the body in his car, and set it on fire. Leon is in shock at what Tony has done, but Tony is happy: "Don't worry, everything is O.K. now, Leon. It's killed. They sometimes take on strange forms" (p. 121). As the smoke from the burning car rises into the sky, rain clouds appear, and it would seem it is the end of the long and destructive drought. This serves as a confirmation to Tony that the cop actually did represent witchery, and that what he had done was the right thing to do, the thing that saved nature and his community from the destructive powers of the witch.

Understanding Tony's conviction about the powers of witchery is crucial for understanding the story and to be able to draw from it some insight into the Native culture he represents. Read with the eyes of a 16 year old Norwegian student it is probably easy to dismiss Tony as crazy or mentally ill. Knowing something about the role of witchcraft in his culture will therefore be very helpful both to the comprehension of the story, and as to making more sense of the story in a cultural context.

### 2.2.5 Fiction and reality

An interesting aspect of “Tony’s Story” is that it is loosely based on a true historical event. In 1952, when LMS was just three years old, a state trooper was killed in the Acoma reservation in New Mexico. Two Acoma brothers were charged and sentenced for the killing, and the trial received great attention from the media and the public. The case ended in the brother being sentenced to the death penalty, but this was appealed, and they received a life sentence after psychiatric evaluation (Evers 1985).

In his article from 1985, Lawrence J. Evers explores the relationship between this true historical event and two short stories that were based on the event; Silko’s “Tony’s Story”, and “The Killing of a State Cop” by Simon Ortiz (1974), both published in 1974, 22 years after the actual event. Evers has read the case records, looking into the confessions of the brothers and records from their psychiatric evaluations. The brothers’ confessions tell the story of how they had been out deer hunting when Garcia, the state trooper who had once arrested one of them for drunk driving, followed their car. The brothers then decided to kill him, which they did, and the day after they set fire to the car. Within a couple of days, they were both arrested for the murder, and were eventually sentenced to the death penalty, as mentioned (Evers 1985, p. 18).

In connection with this appeal, the defence called for psychiatric examination of the brothers. The reports from this examination, done by a psychiatrist and anthropologist named Devereux, provide some interesting insight into the cultural context of the murders, as well as shedding light on Silko’s story. Devereux argued that the language used by the brothers in the confession could only be rightly understood if one had knowledge of Acoma culture and language. He also provided some insight into the brothers’ dreams and beliefs in witchcraft. He diagnosed one of the brothers as a psychopath – not for believing in witchcraft, but for believing that witchcraft should be dealt with privately, and not through the Acoma medicine societies, which is the norm in the Acoma culture. He concluded that this brother was “psychotic on the basis of his transformations of cultural beliefs about witchcraft into

private, personal and paranoiac ideas”, and claimed temporary insanity at the time of the killing (Evers 1985, p. 21). The arguments of the psychiatrist won them the reduced sentence, but not a new trial. Instead of the electric chair they had to go to prison for life.

The psychiatrist was worried about the implications that his evaluations could have for the view of Native Americans:

*He cautioned that while Indian beliefs are sometimes mistaken for delusions, in this case the danger was the reverse: that the delusional character of Indian beliefs, as held by the Felipes, might be mistaken for “normal” Acoma belief. The degree and manner of the brothers’ witch beliefs marked them as psychotic rather than cultural in character (Evers 1985:22).*

This quote reveals something about the troublesome relationship between Native Americans and majority American culture, and how incidents such as this might contribute to misunderstandings and prejudice against Native cultures. It also tells us that we should be careful with explaining Tony’s crime in Silko’s story on a purely cultural basis. This question might also provide a basis for interesting discussions in class – whether Tony is psychotic or doing the right thing according to his cultural beliefs.

After the trial and the media attention wore off, stories and rumours of the event lived on. In Evers’ article, he quotes Leslie Marmon Silko’s recollection of the rumours that were in circulation: “This one rumour was that he hated Indians and that he’d been transferred to the Laguna area from near Cuba or Sante Fe because his superiors already knew he was psychotic about Indians. Another story was that he got what was coming to him” (Evers 1985, p. 22). It was such information that formed the basis for Tony’s story for Silko. She was not old enough to have read the newspapers at the time of the trial, and had not researched the case through reading court documents or reports before writing the story.

However, Silko remembers hearing stories about the event growing up, and there must have been a lot of talk about the murder in the family and at Laguna. These stories have stuck

with Silko, and she has used them as inspiration or subject matter for many of her own texts. In an interview by Work & Cowell (2000) she says that

When I was just a little kid I heard people talk about it, and the one thing I remember clearly about the incident is that after the state policeman was killed, the guys who killed him burned the body in the car. And my dad said all that was left of him could be put in a shoe box. I remember that so clearly, and it stayed with me.

(Work & Cowell 2000, p. 37)

In the same interview she also explains the background for choosing to portray the policeman as a witch in the narrator's eyes. It was the fact that the body was burned that stayed with her and in Laguna mythology/stories that is what you do with witches; you burn them. So as a child, hearing the story over and over again, in her child's mind, she must have concluded that the state policeman was a witch. She also mentions in the interview that she found out later that in the trial, during the psychiatric evaluation of the murderers, this is what they claimed; that the policeman was a witch, and that his car had come flying behind them.

Comparing the true life event and the short story, fiction and reality, gives an interesting backdrop for discussing the relationship between truth/fiction. Silko never claimed to be writing a realistic story, but the similarities to the actual event and the results of the psychiatric evaluations are striking. What the story does tell us, is something about the importance of stories in the Laguna culture, how stories are part of the identity of individuals and the entire culture.

The presence of myth and surrealistic elements such as witchery poses a challenge to the western reader. For Tony in "Tony's Story" there is no distinction between myth and reality. This may be challenging for a Norwegian high school student to understand when reading the text, and knowing something about the role of myth and ancient beliefs in the culture of the Laguna people might aid the students' understanding of the story. This is an argument for introducing contextual information in connection with reading the story.

Cynthia Carsten (2006) writes about this problem for the Native American writer:

What is perhaps even more troubling for American Indian writers and scholars, proficient in writing the English language, are the constraints imposed by Euro-American epistemological assumptions and the conventions of the literary genres that reflect and sustain them. (p. 106)

She further writes about how when Native American writers, as well as academics, enter the territory of the cultural production of the majority culture, they have had to find ways of resisting the control and restrictions of Euro-American worldviews, in order to: “challenge the ideologies inherent in the dominant culture’s conventions to knowledge and truth” (p. 106-7). According to Carsten, Silko challenges these conventions in her works, for example in the collection *Storyteller*, in which she presents several genres; short stories, poems, photography and memoir. This form of storytelling is in line with the structure of the narrative traditions of her people and therefore “more faithfully capture[s] the experiential qualities of her communities’ oral traditions and its reflection of Pueblo orientation in time and place” (p. 107). This means that as for learning something about the traditions and world view of the Pueblo people, reading Silko’s stories will be highly relevant.

## 2.2.6 The importance of nature, landscape, and weather

Landscape, weather and nature are important elements in Native American culture, and are an integral part of the culture, language and storytelling. “Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth” (Silko 1996, p. 21). Nature and weather are important elements also in “Tony’s Story”. The story starts with a description of the weather; “It happened one summer when the sky was hot and the summer rains did not come; the sheep were thin and the tumbleweeds turned brown and died” (Silko 2012, p. 116). There is a drought, and it is apparent that this is not normal, they usually get summer rain. There is an element of imbalance in nature, and we understand that things are not the way they should be. This description of the drought contributes to a sense of threat and danger in the beginning of the story; the drought is both threatening in the sense that it kills the crops and there is some greater imbalance in the cosmic order.

The Pueblo Natives have ways of dealing with such cosmic imbalance, to restore harmony in the universe. Leon, who has just come back from the army, has been asked to dance in the Corn Dance the next day. The Corn Dance is a very important ritual for the Pueblo Natives. To the Pueblos corn “provides the link between the human and nonhuman worlds, because it is symbolic of perfect cosmic order and balance” (Carsten 2006, p. 118). Corn crops have provided a very important source of sustenance for the Pueblos, and to make sure the crops turn out good is crucial for the livelihood of their society. The Corn Dance is a ritual meant to link the human and nonhuman world, and help restore the cosmic balance, or “a ritual means of maintaining the interrelationality between human beings and the creative powers of the Pueblo cosmos” (Carsten 2006, p. 118). The summer Tony’s Story” is set, the cosmic order is apparently out of balance, and as we have already seen, this is caused by the presence of a destructive force; a witch who has taken the form of a state cop.

Historically, the Pueblo people have had to survive in a very tough environment. Silko writes in *Yellow Woman* (1996) that:

The unpredictability of the weather, the aridity and harshness of much of the terrain in the high plateau country explain in large part the relentless attention the ancient Pueblo people gave to the sky and the earth around them. Survival depended upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings, but also among all things – the animate and the less animate, since rocks and mountains were known on occasion to move. (p. 29)

This helps explain the important part that the landscape and weather play in the ancient myths, the stories and in ceremonies.

There are many references to the landscape in “Tony’s Story”. The references are often quite specific, not general descriptions of landscape that bring symbolic significance, but descriptions that help identify a specific place. This is common in Pueblo stories; specific locations have an important role in the stories. Silko herself writes that “stories are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact location where a story took place” (1996, p. 33).

In Tony’s story, the most central event is the killing of the state cop. This is also the passage that is most specifically linked to a described location: “We were in the narrow canyon with pale sandstone close on either side – the canyon that ended with a spring where willows and grass and tiny blue flowers grow” (Silko 2012, p. 120). This is not a general description of landscape, but points to a specific place that people native to the area would recognise, something that, according to Silko, is typical in the Pueblo storytelling tradition:

The places where the stories occur are precisely located, and prominent geographical details recalled, even if the landscape is well known to listeners, often because the turning point in the narrative involved a peculiarity of the special quality of a rock or tree or plant found only at that place. (1996, p. 33)

If students are able to identify and to understand how central the landscape and nature is in the story, they have also reached a greater understanding of the Pueblo Natives’ culture.

### **2.2.7 The relationship between Native Americans and American Majority Culture**

A central theme in “Tony’s Story” is that of racism. The state policeman appears to have a problem with “Indians”. Already on the first encounter, his attack on Leon seemed to be completely unmotivated. He never gave any explanation to his attack, and he never said a word. We know that Leon had been drinking, and get an idea that this might be the reason for his targeting of Leon. But in any case, this is not the way we expect a policeman to handle this type of situation. We come to wonder if the policeman and Leon have some history, if they have meet and had a conflict previously.

At their next encounter, again in a situation where the policeman has no specific reason to target them, we get to know more about the policeman. It is apparent that he has a problem with Native Americans, and that this has caused him some trouble in the past: “I don’t like smart guys, Indian. It’s because of you guys that I’m here. They transferred me here because of Indians. They thought there wouldn’t be as many for me here. But I find them” (Silko 2012, p. 119). The policeman has been transferred to this place from another area, seemingly because he has targeted Indians and done things that are not acceptable in his profession. The problem has not been resolved by his transferral, however. In the last encounter between Tony, Leon and the cop, he raises his billy club and says: “I like to beat Indians with this” (Silko 2012, p. 120). This implies that this is not the first time he has done something like this.

Tony, on his part, interprets the raised billy club as being the human bone he saw in his dream “painted brown to look like wood” (p. 120). He refers to something that he presumably has heard in one of the stories of the community: “they’ll do that, you know – carve the bone into a spoon and use it around the house until the victim comes within range” (p. 120).



Students in upper secondary school will most likely be somewhat aware of the historical conflicts between Native Americans and Europeans who settled in America. They will have learned something about the wars, and about the displacement of Natives during the westward expansion. They may not, however, be aware of quite how brutally the Native Americans have been treated in the history of the US, the discrimination they have faced, and the pressures to conform to majority Christian American culture.

There is a proverb that Mieder (1993) has found to have originated in the 1860s and has also discovered was still in use at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; “The only good Indian is a dead Indian”. This proverb was probably invented to justify the literal slaughter of the Native Population during the westward expansion. But there is also a different interpretation of the word “dead”, in the phrase. In a metaphorical sense a “dead Indian” can be seen as a Native who has abandoned his/her native beliefs and customs in order to join the majority culture as a “good Christian”, or who is confined to a restricted life on a reservation. (Mieder 1993, p. 39).

### 2.2.8 Teaching “Tony’s Story”

This short story offers cultural insight on many different levels, but it is a text that does pose some challenges to the reader. First of all, the narrative is not straightforward. On the first reading one is left with a feeling of confusion, and one has to go back through the narrative in order to detect the clues Silko has left us that explain why Tony did what he did. On a second reading, paying attention to these clues, the story makes more sense. Another challenge is the question of context and background information.

When teaching any sort of literature it is important to consider the question of context and background. How much information does the student need in order to achieve a sufficient understanding of a story? Will students be able to understand the cultural issues discussed above, just from reading “Tony’s Story”? If context should be introduced in connection with the reading, when should the contextual information be given, and how? The answers to these questions depend on what approach to reading of literature is chosen.

Leslie Marmon Silko herself offers some thoughts about the importance of context. When asked in an interview what she thinks people should know about context before they read her stories, Silko replied “well, nothing, really” (Fisher 2000, p. 25). At first, then, Silko seems to think that her stories can be read, understood and appreciated without any knowledge of context, of Pueblo society and history. However, further on in the interview she modifies this reply by saying that, actually, it would be good if people had some knowledge of history, American history, and also of geography; “Included in geography should be the way people live, some of their attitudes, their point of view, that helps” (Fisher 2000, p. 25). What she seems to be saying here, then, is that people do not necessarily need to know a lot about the context to be able to read and enjoy Silko’s stories. But it does help the reader to a greater understanding of more of the aspects of the story if they do know something about the history and society from which the story came.

How much, then, does the average 16-17 year old Norwegian student know about American history, geography and of Native American culture? Based on the curriculum plans for lower

and upper secondary school, students are expected to have some knowledge of the history and culture of English speaking cultures in general, and also knowledge of Native People in English speaking countries: “discuss and elaborate on texts by and about indigenous peoples in English-speaking countries” and “discuss and elaborate on culture and social conditions in several English-speaking countries” (Ministry of Education and Research 2013).

However, it is not to be expected that they know much about the specific Native culture of the Pueblos or the area which they came from. It is also probable, that the students’ knowledge of the historically complex and troubled relationship between Native Americans and white Americans is somewhat limited.

Reading this story, then, would be a great starting point for acquiring more knowledge of Native American history and contemporary society. From the text students can potentially gain knowledge and insight into some aspects of the culture of a specific Native community. They could acquire understanding of the role of storytelling, of myth and religion, as well as insight into the contrast between Native and Majority American culture and why this relationship sometimes is conflicted. Hopefully, this increased insight can lead to motivation to learn more about Native American culture and history.

## 2.3 “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

### 2.3.1 About the Author

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977 to academic parents employed at the University of Nigeria. Adichie herself has studied at several universities, receiving a master’s degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University and an MA in African Studies from Yale University. She spent her childhood in Nigeria, growing up in the same house as great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe had formerly lived. At 19 she moved to the USA to study (Tunca, n.d.)

While she was still a student, she started working on what became her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which was published in 2003. The book earned her literary recognition and she was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005. The book is about a young Nigerian girl who has been traumatized by her tyrannical Catholic father. The novel begins with “Things started to fall apart at home when...” (Adichie 2003, p. 3), which is one of several parallels to the writing of Chinua Achebe. Achebe himself has praised Adichie’s writing and called her “a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers” (Brookes, 2014). Perhaps best known for her novels, including also *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for which she won the Orange Prize for Fiction (2007), and *Americana* (published 2013), she has also written short stories that have been critically acclaimed.

With her feet firmly planted in both Nigerian and American culture, her books and stories often revolve around issues like culture clashes, alienation and of family, identity and politics. These are highly relevant themes in the context of English teaching, and Adichie representing two different English speaking countries also makes her a very interesting writer.

### 2.3.2 About the Story

Adichie's short story "The Thing Around Your Neck", is from the short story collection by the same name, published in 2009. The collection consists of 12 different stories, some set in the USA, some set in Nigeria but all with a connection to Nigeria. Many of them are about exile and alienation, culture meetings, prejudice and stereotypes.

The title story, which is the seventh in the collection, is about a young Nigerian girl who wins a visa to the USA. She goes there to live with her uncle and his family, and attends community college, until her uncle acts inappropriately towards her. After this incident she runs away on a Greyhound bus, moves to a tiny room and works in a restaurant. She has a relationship with a white man who she finds to be very different from all the other white men she has met. When she finds out her father has died, she goes home to Nigeria to be with her family. The story is left open-ended, we do not know if she comes back to the USA, or what will happen to her relationship with her boyfriend.

In one way this can be seen as a love story, and the relationship with the white man is a very central element in the narrative. However, it is most of all a story about culture meetings, a comparison of two very different societies, and about the experience of being alone in a new and unfamiliar culture. It is also about misinformation and lack of knowledge resulting in wrongful preconceptions of people who are different from ourselves, and how this leads to prejudice and discrimination. In this chapter I will focus on how Adichie deals with these issues in "The Thing Around Your Neck", and discuss how this story can lead students to increasing their knowledge and understanding of different societies, and what happens when cultures meet. I will also discuss a very distinct feature of the short story – that it is narrated in the second person – and what this means in terms of emphasising the themes and how the reader relates to the story.

### 2.3.3 Themes:

Several different themes can be identified in “The Thing Around Your Neck”. A central one is, as mentioned above, what happens when representatives from two different cultures meet, and how lack of knowledge leads to preconceived notions of the other culture. This goes both ways, of course. The main character in the story, Akunna, believes before she leaves for America, that all Americans “had a car and a gun” (Adichie 2009, p. 115), and that everyone lives in a big house. This image of America is quickly dismantled when she sees and experiences America for herself. Americans also have their prejudice of people from Africa. Akunna’s fellow students at the community college she attends “asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you’d seen a car before you came to America” (Adichie 2009, p. 116).

A related theme is that of alienation and exile. Being a stranger in an unfamiliar country where she does not quite understand the culture leaves Akunna feeling lonely and alienated. Twice she leaves behind home and family; first in Lagos, then when leaving her uncle’s home. This loneliness and feeling of not being home is not something that comes across very clearly throughout the story, but it is mentioned in one single paragraph, which also reflects the title of the story.

Cultural confrontations, as I mentioned, is one of the central themes, and from that springs the theme of stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as the “beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups” (Hilton & Hippel 1996, p. 240), and they spring from oversimplified, often mistaken assumptions about groups that also fail to see individual differences within those groups.

Love is also a major theme, as a substantial part of the story deals with Akunna’s relationship with a white American man. However, this love story can also be seen as relating to the themes of stereotypes and alienation. The man does not live up to the

stereotypical image of the white American male, and he, in turn, does not possess the stereotypical image of an African that Akunna expects him to have.

### **2.3.4 Characterization:**

The protagonist in the story is a young woman from Nigeria, leaving her family and home in Lagos to seek a better life in America, with the help of her uncle (who is not actually her uncle but a distant in-law). We do not know her name until the middle of the story, when we get to know it in connection with her meeting the man she will go on to have a relationship with: “He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty” (Adichie 2009, p. 120). Because of the way the story is narrated we get to know Akunna quite well; we learn about her past, her thoughts and her feelings, and we see the world through her eyes.

The female character in the story shows tremendous strength and independence. When her uncle comes to her with sexual intent; “your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and cartons and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning” (Adichie 2009, p. 116), she refuses to accept his approach, and she goes off on her own to make a life for herself, leaving behind the security of living in her uncle’s house to get a room and a job of her own: “You locked yourself in the bathroom until he went back upstairs, and the next morning you left, walking the long windy road...” (Adichie 2009, p. 117).

Akunna’s uncle has been in America for several years, and has in many ways achieved the American dream. He lives in a house by a lake in a “white town” in Maine. He works for a “white” company that pays him “a few thousand more than the average salary plus stock options because they were desperately trying to look diverse” (p. 116). He is well aware of the prejudice, telling his niece to expect this “mixture of ignorance and prejudice”, and he tells her about the stories going around in the neighbourhood a few months after he moved

in, that they noticed the squirrels had started to disappear; “They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals” (p. 117).

The other central character is a man that Akunna meets through her job as a waitress, and develops a relationship with. He is an educated and well-travelled white man. He is in many ways different from the image that Akunna has of American people. He has visited several African countries, has knowledge of African literature and history and has an open mind. He is not like the people who “told you that they loved animals and wanted to go on a safari” (p. 119), or condescending like the people who liked Africa too much or too little. He says that when he visits new places he likes to “see how real people lived, like in the shantytowns, because he never did any of the silly tourist stuff when he was abroad” (p. 120).



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### 2.3.5 Narrator:

A distinguishing feature of the story is that it is written throughout in the second person. This is quite an unusual style of narration. Jakob Lothe (2000) does not mention this type of narration at all, but Mieke Bal (2009) offers some perspectives on the second person narrator. Giving an example of second person narration from a novel by Michel Butor, she writes of this type of narration that: “The ‘you’ is simply an ‘I’ in disguise, a ‘first person’ narrator talking to himself; the novel is a ‘first person’ narrative with a formal twist to it that does not engage the entire narrative situation, as one would expect it should” (p. 29).

The pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’, as opposed to ‘she’, ‘he’, ‘they’ and the like, are empty in themselves. They do not refer outside of the situation in which they are uttered. Each utterance is performed by an ‘I’ and addressed to a ‘you’. This second person is crucial, for it is that subject that confirms the ‘I’ as a speaker. Conversely, the ‘you’ becomes an ‘I’ as soon as the perspective shifts. It is only as (potential) ‘I’ that the ‘you’ him- or herself has the subjectivity to act, hence, to confirm the subjectivity of the previous ‘I’. (p. 30).

Bal then concludes that “second-person narrators are not only logically impossible but also not manageable for a reader. It is the latter who is narrative’s ‘second person’” (p. 31).

In “The Thing Around Your Neck” it seems that the second person narration is, in fact, a first person “in disguise”. The narrator is someone who has intimate knowledge of the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings; it is Akunna’s point of view we are getting. So why not use “I” instead of “you”, if the effect in either case is that the reader transforms the second person narration into first person? As in the novel that Bal uses as an example, the narrator seems to be someone addressing herself. The narrator is outside the story, addressing Akunna: “You laughed with your uncle and felt at home in his house” (Adichie 2009, p. 116). This could just as easily have been written in the first person: “I laughed with my uncle...”. However, the second person narration serves some purposes that are related to the themes of the story, which would not be achieved with the use of first person narration.

Firstly, the use of “you” instead of “I” creates a certain distance to the protagonist, which reflects the feeling of alienation and loneliness that Akunna feels. We get the sense that she is looking at herself and her experiences from the outside, just like she is an outsider in the story looking at society around her with a sense of distance. We can imagine this is Akunna herself at an older age, telling her story to her younger, less experienced and knowledgeable self.

Secondly, the second person narration has an effect on the reader. Using “you” gives a sense of identification, that the reader could be Akunna, going through these kinds of experiences. It makes the reader feel more closely connected to the story, and adds an affective dimension to it.

Another possible effect of this type of narration is that it gives a notion of Akunna not being in control of her own life. Matt DelConte (2003) writes in an essay where he discusses second person narration that “... it manifests in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions” (p. 204). Though there are instances where Akunna shows the ability to take power over her own actions, like leaving her uncle’s house, there are also examples of events that seem to just happen to her. Going to America does not seem to be a very active decision on her part, she just happens to win the green card lottery, and does what is expected of her.

The fact that the story is narrated in the second person is a feature of the text that will probably be noticed by students, as they have most likely not been exposed to many texts with this type of narration before. It is also a feature of the text that is worth focusing on in class. By discussing the effects of the second person narration, it is possible that students will gain a better understanding of the relationship between narrative form and the thematic contents of this story. Students’ awareness of this relationship will be useful in their readings/analyses of other texts.

### **2.3.6 Title:**

The title of the story, and of the short story collection, “The Thing Around Your Neck”, is difficult to understand at first, and brings connotations of death or suicide. But in the middle of the story, it becomes quite clear, as the title is reflected in a sentence: “At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep” (p. 119). This “thing”, is obviously not something physical, but a somatic manifestation of Akunna’s psychological state. The loneliness is such a strong feeling for her, and she feels like it is choking her. We also get a glimpse into her psychological state in the paragraph above: “Nobody knew where you were, because you told no one. Sometimes you tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway, and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arm” (p. 119). Her feeling of invisibility is also related to her loneliness.

### 2.3.7 Culture and Society in “The Thing Around Your Neck”

In a speech titled “The Danger of a Single story” (2009), Adichie gives some examples of what happens when you know only “one story” of someone, and specifically of her own experiences of facing the “single story” of Africans told in the west. She talks about how her American room-mate in university thought she did not know how to use a stove, or that she would request to listen to her “tribal music”, and how Adichie finds herself having only heard one story of Mexicans (the story of the Mexican immigrants), that she was surprised upon going to Mexico to find that this single story was not true.

What Adichie means by “single story” is the non-nuanced and often negative image of a certain culture and society. Her experience as a Nigerian is mainly meeting the western image of Africa, which she describes thus:

Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner”.

(Adichie 2009a, 11<sup>th</sup> para.)

The single story of Africa that is presented in various versions in the west, is cause for stereotypes and prejudice. Adichie claims that “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (2009, 22<sup>nd</sup> para.). This is a fact that it is important to be aware of, both for students and for teachers. Any one story cannot tell the whole story of a culture or a society.

Seeing Adichie’s speech in relation with “The Thing Around Your Neck”, there are many parallels between Adichie’s own life and Akunna’s life. They both go to live in America and encounter some of the same prejudice, and it seems that Adichie in this story is trying to describe in fictional form the same experience she talked about in her speech.

Adichie's story gives the reader insight into not only Nigerian society and culture, but also into American society, from an outsider's point of view. Through the protagonist's observations about the society she arrives in as a stranger, we get some insight into certain aspects of American/western culture and the prejudice that might meet people who are seen as not fitting into the norm.

Already on the first page of the story we learn about the protagonist's background, her and her family's image of America and the conditions under which they live in Nigeria. It seems that for her Nigerian family, the American Dream is still going strong. Her uncle, who already lives and works in America, has entered the whole family into the American visa lottery, and it was the young girl, our protagonist, who was lucky enough to win. The living conditions of the family at home in Lagos, do leave something to dream about. She lives in a room with her mother, father and three siblings, and visitors have to lean "against the unpainted walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round" (Adichie 2009, p. 115). At seeing her off, the family expects great things to happen to her in America: "In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house" (115). They also include in their goodbyes wishes for things they want her to send them, such as shoes, handbags and perfumes. The contrast between the conditions they live under and their dreams for Akunna is great.

The protagonist's experiences in America, however, show us that the image of America is complex and the story of America that she has been told, the story of an America where everyone has "a car and a gun" (p. 115), is not necessarily true, there are more stories, and not everyone can achieve the American dream.

The American students' prejudice and lack of knowledge of Africa are apparent in the questions they ask the protagonist, which are quite humorous but probably also quite realistic. American students, just like Norwegian students, probably have limited knowledge and insight into African society and culture, seeing the entire continent as a poverty-stricken, war-ravaged homogenous country where people live in straw huts along with their goats.

Through media, the story we hear of Africa is usually just this one, and war, hunger and poverty are words associated with the African continent.

### 2.3.8 Teaching “The Thing Around Your Neck”

Reading “The Thing Around Your Neck”, might inspire students to discuss how and why prejudice and preconceived notions about other cultures come about, and help them understand how and why it is important to understand the complexity and diversity that exists also within other cultures than our own. It can also help students see that it is important to seek out other stories, to challenge their own prejudice and the image they have of a certain culture, to increase their knowledge and insight. In the words of Adichie herself, to understand that there is a danger in only knowing “a single story” of others.

“The Thing Around Your Neck” is linguistically not especially challenging, and there are aspects of the story that can be recognisable even for Norwegian students. The advantage of the story is that it partly shows aspects of a society that the students know something about already – American society and culture. But they also get to see this society through the eyes of someone who does not know it in the same way they do; the eyes of someone whose cultural background is very different from theirs. In this way there are good possibilities of the students gaining some new insights about American culture.

The main character in the story is from Nigeria, and the students might not have much knowledge of Nigerian culture before reading the text. In fact, students might find themselves sharing some of the same prejudice of Africa and Africans as the American students we meet in the story. There are good chances then, that the reader will gain some new insight, and that their prejudice might be challenged, and their views of African culture might be altered or modified.

### 3. The Short-stories, Culture and Teaching

#### 3.1 What can fiction offer that factual literature cannot?

When approaching the topic of culture and society and learning about other countries, the traditional approach by teachers and textbooks has been use of non-fictional literature. However, as Juliet Munden (2002), argues in an article titled “Fiction as a source of insight in social studies”, there are many advantages to using fictional literature as well. Fictional literature serves as a very different window into other cultures, and can provide insight into parts of the culture that are not readily available through factual texts.

Munden proposes four good reasons for including fictional texts into social studies, and these reasons are also highly relevant in the context of learning about English-speaking cultures in English class. I will present Munden’s four arguments, and provide examples from the stories I have analysed and discussed above.

The first argument is that “Fiction can function as an ethnographic and anthropological source” (p. 144). By this she means that fictional literature can show us the way that the value systems of a culture are reflected in the way people think, speak and behave, how history and complex social situations direct people’s lives (Munden 2002, p. 145). This is very apparent in “Tony’s Story” where we, through the main character Tony, get a glimpse into his people’s culture through his dreams, thoughts and beliefs. It is also clear in “The Thing Around Your Neck”, where we get insight into two different cultures, through the main character’s meeting with a culture she is unfamiliar with. In this way we gain some understanding of both American and Nigerian culture, and what happens in the intersection between two different cultures. “The Ultimate Safari” is a good example of people in history; how history directs people’s lives. It brings a human “face” to the victims of politics



and power, which is hard to achieve through for instance a factual article about the war in Mozambique.

Another argument is that fiction can “give insight into moral dilemmas” (p. 144). The moral dilemmas that face an individual in real life or a character in a fictional text, and the way these moral dilemmas are met, say a lot about the values and beliefs of a society. All three short stories discussed above include characters faced with moral dilemmas. Tony and Leon in “Tony’s story” have different ways of dealing with the dilemma of how to handle the situation with the police officer. Tony’s close cultural ties to the Native tribe he belongs to, in comparison with Leon’s westernized characteristics, highlight the difference in value systems and beliefs of the two cultures. The choice to leave the grandfather behind in “The Ultimate Safari” gives us insight into the desperately difficult choices that have to be made in matters of life and death.

The third reason to make use of fictional texts is that it “makes possible affective involvement” (p. 144). Munden claims that this affective dimension of fiction can “contribute to forming and changing attitudes” (p. 146). Being able to identify and develop sympathies with a character makes it easier to not only gain insight into different cultural formations, but also, to use McCormick’s terminology, change the reader’s general repertoire. In this way, the reader can achieve a deeper or changed understanding of a culture he/she is not familiar with. I mentioned the affective dimension in my discussion of “The Ultimate Safari”, and this is an example of a story where the narrator is clearly chosen for affective reasons.

In her last argument, Munden points to fictional literature being “an important component of African culture”, and how “a raised awareness of the distinctive and valuable contribution of African fiction can contribute to a questioning of the virtual monopoly of Western literature as a canon” (p. 146). The same argument can be made for literature from other parts of the world, such as literature by Native Peoples. Literature in itself is an important part of any people’s culture. The importance of oral stories and myth in the Pueblo culture serves as a

good example of this. “Tony’s Story” provides a great example of how literature is an inherent part of the culture that plays into all walks of life.

## 3.2 Reading literature - from a cultural perspective

As presented in the introduction of this thesis, McCormick (1994) uses a social-cultural model in her approach to reading. This model sees reading as a social process, where the historical and ideological contexts of both text and reader play an important part. This approach to reading can serve as a useful starting point for discussing the three short stories in relation to how students can gain cultural insight through literature. This, however, calls for a brief explanation of the model and some of the terms employed.

The fundamental assumption of McCormick's social-cultural model is that texts as well as readers are ideologically situated. Both reader and text are dependent upon what McCormick calls general and literary ideology, and on the general and literary repertoire of both. General ideology refers to all the practices of a society that are perceived as universal. To McCormick, ideology is seen as a "social glue", and the general ideology of a society will determine what seems natural for a writer to write. Likewise, it will determine what seems natural to us as readers. Literary ideology is "the particular assumptions, beliefs, habits and practices that each society has in relation to literature" (p. 74). The two are closely connected, but the literary ideology has to do with questions of what literature is or should be, and questions about the role of the writer, as well as epistemological questions of literature and reality.

Literary and general repertoire refer to how the text appropriates the general and literary ideology of the society it originates from. The former points to such features of the text as form, plot, characterization and so on, while the latter is the moral or religious ideas and beliefs etc. that can be found in the text (McCormick 1994, p. 70).

It is important, however, to remember that, the "the text's literary and general repertoires are not static over time" (McCormick 1994, p. 70). As historical and social circumstances change, the repertoire of the text will also change, depending of the conditions in which it is

read. As an example, “The Ultimate Safari”, at the time it was published, can be seen as having a political agenda to raise awareness of the war in Mozambique and the consequences of South African involvement. Today, however, decades after the war, it can perhaps be read as more of a historical testament to the horrors of war, specifically during the war in Mozambique, but also more generally.

The general and literary ideology of the reader, therefore, is also of great importance. Readers exist within specific historical and socio-cultural formations, and from these formations they develop their own repertoires, both general and literary. These depend on such aspects as their previous literary experience, their reading strategies and their attitudes to literature, as well as more general attitudes of religion, race, gender and so on. McCormick writes that “the reader’s repertoire can perhaps best be conceptualized as a complex network of discourses that have the potential to interact with each other as well as with the larger culture” (1994, p. 71). This means that upon being exposed to new discourses, for example by reading literature, a person’s discourse may change in a certain area, which may in turn change the person’s discursive structures in other areas as well. In other words, literature can be a powerful force in changing a person’s beliefs and perceptions of the world.

McCormick acknowledges the link between this social-cultural model and schema theory. Both theories are based on the assumption that the experiences of a person shape their categorisation of information, ideas etc., and that how this categorization matches that of the text will determine how the reader will read a text. However, schema theory “seeks to isolate and delimit particular schemata” (1994, p. 72), and the goal is to find the right schemata to match that of the text. The social-cultural model, on the other hand, acknowledges the overlapping and diverse nature of the repertoires of the text and the reader, and that “there is no ideal repertoire of the reader to match that of the text” (p. 72). To believe that a student can achieve the “correct reading” of a particular literary text by being given the right schemata by the teacher or by a textbook, means that one does not acknowledge that aspects of the repertoires of both text and reader will shift according to the reading context.

If we consider the social-cultural model in relation to the stories analysed and discussed above, we can see that reading literature that comes from a culture that the reader is not familiar with will challenge this reader's repertoire, but can also contribute to changing it. McCormick (1994) writes that "every time we read a work that comes from the distant past or a different cultural formation, we encounter assumptions, beliefs and perspectives that are different from our own" (p. 76).

When different readers encounter a text, it is not uncommon that they will have differing readings of the text, that their interpretation of the text will vary and that for instance their sympathies lie with different characters. A student who has a background as a refugee will most likely have a different reading and interpretation of "The Ultimate Safari" than a student who does not have this kind of background, just like a student who has extensive knowledge of Native American culture will have a different understanding of "Tony's Story" than someone who knows very little. That is also why students might need some guidance, in terms of being provided with sufficient knowledge about for example the historical context or the cultural formation that the text describes.

In a doctoral dissertation about how literature is read by Norwegian and Eritrean students Munden (2010), she found that the Norwegian students used the interpretive strategy of relating the emotions of the characters in the text. This strategy does not take into consideration the social and political contexts of the literary texts, something which the Norwegian students did not engage with. (Munden 2010, p. 325)

Although Munden's respondents in this study were in tertiary education, not secondary, it is very likely that secondary school students would employ the same strategies in their interpretation of literature. Focus would be on an affective response to the story, without taking into consideration the social and political context of the text. A reading of the stories analysed in this thesis, such as "The Ultimate Safari" might elicit emotional responses like sympathy for the little girl and how she feels, but perhaps not so much focus on the historical circumstances that placed her in the role as a refugee and a victim of war.

Not until they were invited to do so, did the students in Munden's study engage with the texts in terms of a more 'symptomatic reading'. "Reading symptomatically" is a term presented by McCormick (1994) which relates to reading texts from "a different ideological formation, whether distant in time or place". A symptomatic reading means looking for "the symptoms or signs of the power and contradictions involved in that culture's ideology" (McCormick 1994, p. 75).

I believe, as does Munden, that there is great potential, in secondary as well as in tertiary education, for more focus on the social, historical and political context of literary texts. Munden writes that: "The study of literature in academic institutions would benefit, I believe, by being more aware of its educational potential, as a place where the reader/audience can observe, experience, explore and learn not only, and not even primarily, about literary devices and the narrative of literary history, but about how other people live their lives, and how we want to live our own" (Munden 2010, p. 326-327). But, as mentioned above, students might need to be invited to and helped along the way in order to get as much knowledge and insight from reading literature.

To help students read and understand a short story (or any other text) can be seen as a great balancing act on the part of the teacher. McCormick writes that students can be intimidated and overwhelmed both by being left on their own with the text as well as by being given the background information that the teacher decides is necessary for comprehension. She believes that students, with both these approaches are encouraged to "believe that they themselves are incapable of reading, understanding, and certainly analysing such texts, which seems to appear to contain secret and specialized knowledge" (McCormick 1994, p.59). Further she writes that the way to give students the capacity to develop the ability to learn about and understand the historical conditions of the text is to provide them with "theoretical discourses that can demystify written texts (...) and provide a discursive space for concrete cultural and historical analysis" (McCormick 1994, p. 59). Then they can begin to develop more critical reading skills where they relate the text to their own historical conditions, comparing their own ideological repertoires to that of the text. This can be

compared to Simensen's (1998) levels of reading comprehension, as presented in chapter 2, where the second level entails the ability to "read between the lines", and reading comprehension on the third level means being able to evaluate the text based on personal knowledge and experience. The role of the teacher then, can be seen as that of providing the analytical and introduce them to the proper discourses with regards to cultural and historical analysis, as mentioned above.

Another issue when it comes to reading short stories, and to literature in general, is the students' skills in literary analysis. Are students able to analyse a short story on a level that makes them able to recognize and gain insight into some of the cultural issues that a story describes? Being able to understand symbolism and irony in "The Ultimate Safari" will help students see more clearly the themes of the story, and to better understand power structures that are implicitly described, in McCormick's words – a symptomatic reading.

Terry Eagleton (2007) writes that this is a common problem with students, both in upper secondary school and in college. His description of how students relate to literature is recognisable to me as a teacher in upper secondary school in Norway as well. He writes that:

Most students, faced with a novel or a poem, spontaneously come up with what is commonly known as 'content analysis'. They give accounts of works of literature which describe what is going on in them, perhaps with a few evaluative comments thrown in. To adopt a technical distinction from linguistics, they treat the poem as language, but not as discourse. (p. 2)

He writes mainly of poetry here, but the same goes for other genres of literature, such as short stories. This can be related to what Munden (2010) concluded with; that students understand the content, and relate to literature on an emotional level, but do not engage in the more cultural or political issues that the text might deal with.

Eagleton further writes about the relationship between form and content, and the importance of paying attention to how the form of a literary text relates to what the text is about. "There is a politics of form as well as a politics of content. Form is not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it" (2007, p. 8). It is important then, that teachers focus some attention

on showing students how to pay attention to form and what form means in terms of content. To illustrate with an example; paying attention to and analysing the effect of the use of a second person narrator in “The Thing Around Your Neck” might help students understand the state of mind of the main character, thus possibly increasing their insight into themes such as alienation and loneliness. In “The Ultimate Safari” there is a certain contrast between form and content. Starting the story with a travel advertisement makes the reader expect to read a travel memoir or a description of an exciting journey. The story does, in a way, take the form of a travel description, but the content highlights the contrast between a traditional safari journey that the typical white tourist would take to Africa.

In addition to paying attention to form, Eagleton also points out the importance of context. “To look at the historical high points of literary criticism is to witness a kind of dual attentiveness: to the grain and texture of literary works, and to those works’ cultural contexts” (2007, p. 8). It is important then, to be able to analyse the form of a literary text, to understand what form means in relation to the content, and also to be able to take into account the historical and cultural context of the text.



## 4. Summing up

In this thesis, my main concern has been to show how short stories can provide a great source of insight into and knowledge of cultural and social issues. Through an analysis of three different short stories and a discussion of theories about reading and story comprehension in relation to these stories, I have attempted to answer the questions posed in the introduction to this thesis:

Short stories as a source of cultural insight in English: What possibilities and challenges can be encountered when working with short stories in a teaching context?

The choice of the short stories was made on the basis of having to be accessible to students of 16-17 years of age, both linguistically and with regard to content. In addition they were chosen because of their potential to provide cultural insight and knowledge. Being quite different both in form and content, the short stories present a variety of challenges and possibilities for students.

The three short stories I chose to analyze here all give us a glimpse of the destinies of very different characters situated far apart in literary time and space. We have met the girl who had lost almost everything but hope, the young woman who sought new possibilities far from her home and family, and the Native American whose beliefs lead him to commit a violent crime. True to the short story genre, we do not get to know a whole lot about the wider context, and we do not get to know much about the life of the characters before and after the central narrative plot. We can say we get to see the lives of the characters in a flash, which is, in Nadine Gordimer's opinion, symptomatic of human experience – we experience life through flashes of insight and inspiration.

In a classroom context, there are several advantages to working with short stories that can be related to the definition of what a short story is. A short story is by definition of relatively short length, and in Edgar Allan Poe's opinion, it can be read in one sitting. The fact that it is short, of course, makes it easier to teach. It is possible, in many cases, both to read and to discuss a short story within the scope of an hour or two. Another advantage is what Poe and Matthews agreed most characterized the short story; a "unity of impression". This unity enables the reader to focus on the story itself, and to see the narrative as a whole. The fact that the short story is relatively short also makes it possible to incorporate into the English classes a wide variety of texts from different eras and parts of the world. This is also a central issue, as students are expected to read and discuss literature from a variety of English-speaking countries.

In my analysis of the three short stories I have focused on aspects of form and content relevant to the questions posed in the introduction. What insights and new knowledge can these three stories provide? And how is it likely that the texts are met and challenged by readers? I have found that the texts can serve both in providing certain insights in and of themselves, but also that they can serve as good starting points for doing more research into contexts like historical events or discussing cultural and social issues such as prejudice and injustice.

What the three stories have in common is that they show how individuals are shaped by their historical, material and cultural contexts. The stories also share some form of confrontation between different cultures. What happens when the lives of representatives of very different cultures intersect, as is the case in "The Thing Around Your Neck", and in some ways in "Tony's Story", or almost intersect, as in "The Ultimate Safari"? In the latter, we see the stark contrast between the privileged white tourists enjoying their safari in the Kruger National Park, juxtaposed with the black refugees struggling to survive their journey through the same park, with little hope of ever returning to a place they call home. "Tony's Story" shows us how Native American beliefs can come into conflict with modern mainstream American beliefs. It also gives insight into the cultural socialization process, where Tony, who has never left the reservation, and whose beliefs and worldviews are informed by "the

stories that old Teofilo told”, is very different to his friend Leon, who has been away for some years and been socialized into white American culture through his years in the Army. The story of Akunna in “The Thing Around Your Neck” tackles some issues that are highly relevant in a world where representatives of different cultures frequently meet. Our preconceived notions and lack of knowledge of ‘the other’ can often make these meetings challenging.

Cultural and social issues such as the ones mentioned above can, of course, be taught through other channels than short stories, such as factual texts, videos etc. However, what I have attempted to show in this thesis is that short stories offer a different sort of insight and source of knowledge. Literature is a product of the social formation of which it originated and will therefore directly and indirectly reveal much about that formation, such as beliefs, values, norms and ways of communicating. Also, literature has an affective dimension, with its potential to stir the reader’s feelings and sympathies. This also involves a motivational factor, as learning might be facilitated by the presence of emotions.

I will also contend that students, through a close reading and analysis of formal features of the short stories, will develop their awareness of language and meaning. Developing their skills in reading ‘between the lines’, understanding metaphors and the effect of choice of narrator, can help the students better understand both the text and the cultural issues the narrative describes.

Conclusively, the three short stories I have analyzed here provide good examples of how literature can be a source of insight into culture and society. Short stories are, due to their relative shortness and density of meaning, a great tool for teachers of English. It can be challenging for the teacher to provide just the right amount of context for the students to achieve a sufficient understanding of the narrative, and the analytical tools for acquiring a deeper understanding, but with the right guidance and the right motivation, there is great potential for students to expand their cultural knowledge and insight through encounters with short stories.

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## Norsk sammendrag

### **Norsk tittel: «Noveller som en kilde til kulturell innsikt i engelskundervisning»**

Målet med denne masteroppgaven er å undersøke hvordan noveller kan være en kilde til kulturell innsikt i engelskundervisningen. Jeg analyserer tre noveller av forskjellige forfattere fra ulike deler av den engelskspråklige verden: «The Ultimate Safari» av Nadine Gordimer, «Tony's Story» av Leslie Marmon Silko og «The Thing Around Your Neck» av Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Jeg bruker også teori om lesing for å diskutere hvordan disse tekstene kan forstås av lesere.

Handlingen i de tre novellene finner sted i veldig forskjellige kulturelle og sosiale kontekster. I «The Ultimate Safari» beskriver Gordimer en liten jente som sammen med familien sin flykter fra krig gjennom Kruger nasjonalpark, og teksten kan leses som et vitnesbyrd over krigens grusomhet, samtidig som den omhandler tema som maktstrukturer og ulikhet mellom hvite og fargede. «Tony's Story» gir oss et innblikk i kulturen til et av urfolkene i Nord-Amerika, og gir potensielt økt forståelse for tro, verdier og hvor viktig fortellinger er i dette samfunnet. I «The Thing Around Your Neck» blir vi kjent med en ung nigeriansk kvinne som reiser til Amerika for å søke lykken. Her blir hun konfrontert med amerikaneres fordommer mot afrikanere, men også med sine egne stereotypiske oppfatninger av Amerika. Jeg analyserer forskjellige aspekter ved disse novellene, slik som narrasjon, symbolbruk og setting, og hvordan disse underbygger de kulturelle temaene.

I min diskusjon av hvordan tekstene kan leses og forstås av leseren, og muligheter og utfordringer i å skulle undervise med disse novellene, bruker jeg hva McCormick (1994) kaller en sosial-kulturell tilnærming. Denne tilnærmingen ser lesing både som en individuell konstruktiv handling, men anerkjenner også at leseren er situert i tid og rom, som et produkt av sin historiske og sosiale kontekst. Ved hjelp av eksempler fra novellene jeg analyserer, diskuterer jeg rollen den generelle og litterære ideologien til både tekst og leser spiller, og hva dette kan bety for undervisningen. Jeg viser også hvordan fiksjon kan bidra med en annen type innsikt enn faktatekster.



## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine how short stories can provide a source of cultural insight when teaching English. I analyse three different short stories in my search for answers to this question; “The Ultimate Safari” by Nadine Gordimer, “Tony’s Story” by Leslie Marmon Silko, and “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In doing this I also employ theories about reading to discuss how the texts can be understood by readers.

The three short stories are set in very different social and cultural contexts. In “The Ultimate Safari”, Gordimer describes a little girl’s flight through the Kruger National Park, and the text can be read as a testament to the horrors of war, as well as a comment on power structures and inequality between whites and people of colour. Some of the aspects I focus on in my analysis of this story are the use of narrator and symbolism, as these are fundamental for understanding the cultural and social themes. “Tony’s Story” gives us a glimpse into a Native American culture, and provides potential insight into beliefs, values and the importance of stories in this society. In “The Thing Around Your Neck” we get acquainted with a young Nigerian woman who moves to America in pursuit of happiness, and is faced with American prejudice about Africans, as well as having to reconsider her own stereotypical image of Americans. What all three short stories have in common is an element of cultural confrontation.

In my discussion of how these texts can be understood by readers, and the discussion of possibilities and challenges related to teaching the stories, I employ what McCormick (1994) terms a social-cultural approach. This approach sees reading as both an individual constructive act, but the reader is also situated in time and space, as a subject in his/her historical context. Showing examples from the short-stories I analyse, I discuss the role of the general and literary ideology of both text and reader, and how this affects the teaching situation. I also show examples of how fictional texts such as short stories can provide different kinds of insight than factual texts can provide.