

A teacher, a substitute, and a student essay



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American, Charles Baxter, wrote the contemporary short story, "Gryphon," in the United States, in 1985. The time represented in the story is roughly, the 1960s; during which there is a moral and philosophical upheaval occurring throughout the nation. The country (USA), is in the midst of the Vietnam War, the "cold-war," a sexual revolution, and experiences a huge spasm and clash of ideals between parents and children of the "baby-boomer" generation. The action in Gryphon, takes place in an elementary fourth grade class, in a rural community called Five Oaks, Michigan.

Baxter invokes some symbolism as he chooses the unusual name of "Gryphon," for the title of his piece. A "Gryphon," is a mythical creature that is, "half bird and half lion." (251) One of the main characters in the story, a substitute teacher who could be compared to a "Gryphon," has such outstanding beliefs and ideals that in the memory of the students, her presence borders on mythical. She is so different than the community they have known so far, that for these young students, it is easier to think of her as a creature out of a fictional cartoon, than as an actual teacher.

In Gryphon, Tommy, the narrator, experiences a coming of age, as he relates how Miss Ferenczi contradicts the conservative lessons taught by his full time teacher, Mr. Hibler, in this account of small town life in a Midwestern village. Even though Tommy narrates this story of how one substitute teacher changes the facts that he believes to be true, his character is not fully developed in the story; for example, we never learn what his last name is.

But, Tommy represents the average small town boy who is presented with ideals and facts that he has never heard before. Until the day the substitute arrives, Tommy has a normal life. He, like the other students, is surprised to learn that there are such a things as “ substitute facts. ” He is eager to relate his newly acquired knowledge to his mother, but she is not interested: “ She said that six times eleven is sixty-eight! ” (252) Yet in spite of all the magnificent news he has to offer his mother, her only reply is, “ You have chores to do.

After fighting with Wayne, the boy whose death is predicted, and who is responsible for getting Miss Ferenczi fired, Tommy finally realizes that he is acquiring a new way of thinking about things and says, “ She was always right! She told the truth! ” (256) In contrast to the other minor characters in Gryphon, Miss Ferenczi is a fully developed (round) character that turns everything the fourth grade class is taught to believe, upside down. Miss Ferenczi, has a past. She is new to the area: “ I am fairly new to your community. (247) She comes from royalty: “... her grandfather had been a Hungarian prince. ” (247)

Her mother was a pianist who, “ played concerts for people Miss Ferenczi referred to as [crowned heads.]” (247) But most importantly, Miss Ferenczi has unusual ideas. She believes that “ pyramids,” are alive with the spirits of their inhabitants: “ The nature of a pyramid is to guide cosmic energy forces into a concentrated point. ” (250) She is adamant in her belief about reincarnation: “...when people die their souls return to earth in the form of carpenter ants or walnut trees. (251) Most of her beliefs are rather innocuous, but as she brings a deck of Tarot cards into the class and then

predicts the death of one of the students, her ideals take an ominous turn for the worse.

The last of the three individuals in Gyphon to be examined is Mr. Hibler, a minor (flat) character who represents the conservative ideals of small town Michigan. In spite of his limited presence, Mr. Hibler, represents the status quo. Every time students refer to changes in their lesson plans, they compare what they have been taught by Mr. Hibler, to what they are being taught by their substitute teacher.

When the students complain about their timetables, they are referring to the actual studies of multiplication they have learned from their regular teacher, Mr. Hibler. The substitute is happy to tell them that they can always learn a regular fact, from a regular teacher: " When your teacher, Mr. Hibler, returns, six times eleven will be sixty-six again, you can rest assured. And it will be that for the rest of your lives in Five Oaks. " (248) Mr. Hibler, teaches the regular facts, while the substitute teacher, teaches substitute facts: "... think of six times eleven equals sixty-eight as a substitute fact. (248)

Finally, Baxter's short story brings the education of Tommy and his classmates into the politics of the 1960s by forcing the children's families and friends to examine everything they believe and question the validity of their antiquated morals. At the end of Gyphon, we are left with this question; do substitute facts, taught by a substitute teacher, have the power to change old-fashioned ideals in an old-fashioned town? According to Tommy, the answer must be " yes," because he believes that Miss Ferenczi tells the truth.