

“All writing is autobiography; and all autobiography is sorytelling.” (J.M.Coetze, in Attwell, 2015: p. 31)

Objectives:

1. Read and discuss the story *“House Taken Over”* by Julio Cortázar around the different interpretations and symbols that can be found in the story.
2. Develop three exercises to do a short story about oneself:
 - a. Explore memories in five segments (around 3 years each).
 - b. Explore oneself as a group of metaphors.
 - c. Explore oneself in the third person.
3. Share the pieces in the group.
4. Explore feelings, reactions, and ideas about the self after the activity.

Materials:

1. 4 audio recorders.
2. 1 video camera
3. Researcher’s diary
4. Workshop guide
5. Flip chart paper
6. Notebook/Block per student
7. Pens and pencils per student
8. Markers for flipchart
9. Post-its
10. Feelings chart
11. Copies of short story (*House Taken Over*, by Julio Cortázar, 1951)¹.

Notes: This workshop will be done in two different days, parted by the *Writing About Others* workshop, both workshops happening on the same week. This guide, therefore, is divided in days 1 and 2.

¹ You can find a pretty decent translation here: <http://www.bhcc.mass.edu/media/03-documents/House-Taken-Over.pdf>

Workshop Guide:

Before the workshop:

- a. Have four tables with chairs around them.
- b. Each group has an audio recorder and have the camera set up and ready to record.
- c. Have 4 notebooks per table, pencils/pens, post-its, and copies of the first story.
- d. Have the short story books in each group.
- e. Have questions and ground rules done in the previous encounter on the walls where everyone can see it.

Day 1:

1. Introduction to the workshop: (5 minutes)

- a. Welcome the students.
- b. Explain the objectives of the workshop, and that it will happen in two days. This workshop has a more individualistic nature.
- c. Explain today will be focused on reading and discussing the story, and the second day will be focused on the writing. Our discussion will help us think about ourselves, which will be the focus of the workshop.

2. Reading the story: (20 minutes)

- a. **Predictions:** What can we say about the story only through the title?
- b. We will be reading the story altogether. I will start reading out loud and ask for volunteers to continue.

3. Analysis: (10 minutes)

- a. Have the following questions on the flipchart:
 - i. What takes over the house? What allows you to reach that conclusion?
 - ii. Why does he throw the key on the sewer? Why is there no fight against it?
 - iii. What does getting out of the house mean? There are no incorrect answers.
 - iv. What are my own fears? What are the things that motivate me to allow me to get out into the world? What things *'take me over'*?
- b. Ask the students to jot down some ideas and have some volunteers sharing them with the group.
- c. The author uses the story in such way that many possibilities can be interpreted. The same thing happens with ourselves. The way we act, the way we think, what we say, shows an 'us' to the world that is interpreted by many, in many different ways. But who ARE we? Is there an answer to that question? We will explore ourselves through writing in these two days.

4. Writing Exercise 1 (Our lives, adapted from *Winter Counts* by Ziegler, 2008: p. 68): (25 minutes)

- a. Ask them to divide their life in five segments (around three years each segment, giving the average age of the group is 15). – For example, if the student is 15 years old, then the five segments would be like this: 0-2 years, 3-5 years, 7-9 years, 10-12 years, 13-15 years.

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- b. For each segment, ask them to write an image, an important event, or an anecdote that marks that stage that they can remember. Keep it short, and write for each a few sentences.
 - c. Once you have them, pick the ones that most interest you and develop them even further.
 - d. Ask them to please write below some reflections around the following questions:
 - i. What do these moments say about you and who you are?
 - ii. Why are they important? Why did you choose them versus other hundred memories of the time?
 - iii. Are these moments related to who you are today or not? Explain.
5. **Closing:** Thank them for their input and remind them we will continue working on this on Wednesday. Ask them to inquire at home about themselves through these periods of time. They can bring some notes on their findings that can be useful for their own writing.

Day 2:

- 1. **Introduction to the workshop: (5 minutes)**
 - a. Remind the students of the workshop objectives and to please have their notes with them, if they brought any, for what will be developed.
 - b. Tell them two exercises will be done today: one on metaphors and one on doing a short story about themselves.
- 2. **Exercise 1 (Adapted from *Creative Writing Prompt: Write a Description of Yourself Using only Metaphors*, by Thomas, 2017): (20 minutes)**
 - a. Ask them if they know what a metaphor is. If they do, ask them to provide an example, if they don't explain what it is, provide a couple of examples, and ask them to provide one to check for understanding.
 - b. Metaphors are a way to enrich creative writing, and give the possibility of providing images, clarity and originality to your ideas and to help the reader to better connect with what you want to say.
 - c. Provide them with a list of categories, and ask them to choose a few that spark their interest. They are free to add any categories they can think of:

i. animals	xi. rooms in a house
ii. weather phenomena	xii. bodies of water
iii. landmarks	xiii. types of candy
iv. toys	xiv. shapes
v. games	xv. constellations
vi. the four elements	xvi. types of cereal
vii. vehicles	xvii. plants
viii. types of trees	xviii. books
ix. colors	xix. food
x. cards in a deck	xx. Others...
 - d. Break down the categories you chose into actual words - different trees, sweets, plants, toys etc.
 - e. Go through the categories you have selected and the words you chose to write for them and reflect: what would YOU be if you were in that category. Give an example: if you

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were a body of water, what would you be? A lake? An ocean? A puddle? A glass of water? Why? What characteristics do you share? Come up with at least 5 metaphors.

- f. Once you have your list, expand on them as much as you can. For example:
 - i. Body of water: puddle
 - ii. Expand: I appear after a strong rain, I am a kid's favorite playmate, I reflect their innocence and the fun they project in me, then the sun come out, and I disappear but stay in their memories...
 - g. After you are done, see which metaphors talk to you more, which ones resemble you the most? Keep them, as you will use them in the next writing exercise.
- 3. Exercise 2** (Adapted from *Write About Yourself [writing prompt]* by Bunting, 2015): **(30 minutes)**
- a. You will do a short writing about yourself. For that, take notes on:
 - i. The metaphors you developed on the previous exercise.
 - ii. The notes you took on finding more about your younger self.
 - iii. The exercise we did on Monday.
 - b. You will:
 - i. Describe yourself (remember the three aspects of a character: emotional, physical and actions)
 - ii. Describe your surroundings (not necessarily here and now, pick a place of your preference).
 - iii. Describe your frame of mind (thoughts, feelings that carry through time...)
 - iv. Include at least a metaphor from the previous exercise.
 - v. Include a memory you wrote about on the first session.
 - vi. WRITE IT IN THE THIRD PERSON.
 - c. Take 20 minutes to write and develop your piece.
 - d. Ask for volunteers to share their piece. For that, they can give it to you, and you will read them anonymously to the class. Ask the students to provide feedback on:
 - i. What they connected with.
 - ii. An image.
 - iii. A question for the piece.
- 4. Closing:** Ask the students to please give an answer to the following questions:
- a. How do you feel about this exercise?
 - b. Please reflect on one question of your choosing (on the wall), after finishing this workshop.

What does reading and writing in this way allow us?
 Do you think writing and reading change people? Did it change how you thought about yourself/ About others?
 Do we show up in our creative writing? If so, how? What? Why?
 When I read, what do I discover from others? About myself?
 When I write, what do I discover from others? About myself?

References:

Attwell, D. (2015) *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face With Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Bunting, J. (2015) Write About Yourself [writing prompt]. In *The Write Practice*. Available online in: <https://thewritepractice.com/write-yourself/>. Accessed on 12 April 2018.

Thomas, B. (2017) Creative Writing Prompt: Write a Description of Yourself Using only Metaphors. In *Indigo North Counseling, LLC Blog*. Available online on: <https://www.indigonorthcounseling.com/blog/archives/01-2017>. Accessed on 12 April 2018.

Ziegler, A. (2008) *The Writing Workshop Notebook*. London: Souvenir Press.