

I Remember Nan Greene: Learning from Undergraduates

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I remember Nan Greene. She was in a freshman English class I taught at UCLA not long after I arrived as a new assistant professor in the late sixties. Of the tens of thousands of students I have taught over the past fifty years, I don't remember many names, but I do remember Nan Greene's. I remember her because she taught me something very important—that we are all one another's teachers.

One of the texts I had assigned for the course was Vladimir Nabokov's short story, "The Vane Sisters." It was a story I knew well because I had included it in an anthology I had co-edited while still in graduate school, *The Short Story: An Introductory Anthology*, and was a story I had taught several times before. The story is about an anonymous narrator, a French teacher at an all-girls school (as was Nabokov) and his relationship with two sisters, Sybil and Cynthia Vane. Sybil commits suicide over an affair with a faculty colleague of the narrator. Later, the narrator learns that Cynthia too has died. After reading Sybil's suicide note, the narrator says, "I wish I could recollect that novel or short story (by some contemporary writer, I believe) in which, unknown to its author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed...a message." Although I had read and taught the story, it had not occurred to me that Nabokov was talking about his own story! That's where Nan Greene comes in.

When we were discussing the story in class, Nan revealed that she had indeed wondered if this acrostic might apply to this story and so, taking the initial letters of each word in the final paragraph, she found the message: "Icicles by Cynthia. Meter from me. Sybil"—which I take to mean that the icicles [which the narrator says, "only sharpened [his] appetite for other tidbits of light and shade"] are a symbol of the narrator's emotional coldness, which is reinforced by what he sees immediately following ("The lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow")—which is a message from Sybil, now a ghost or umbra, from beyond the grave. Thus, as with all first-person narrators, the narrator of this story inadvertently reveals more about himself than he intends—that is, that he is a cold, uncaring person.

I was so delighted by Nan's insights that I immediately told one of my colleagues on the English faculty what had happened. He paused for a moment and then said, "I have never had a Freshman give me any new insight to a work of literature." I thought, "You poor man!" Over the years I have been blessed to have had many students open poems, stories and novels in ways that I have found both enlightening and hopeful, because, after all, that's what as teachers we most hope for—that our students will have the confidence to reach into their own hearts and minds to discover the delight that, as Robert Frost says, ends in wisdom.