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The College Entrance Examination Board's volume, "12,000 Students and Their English Teachers" (see ED 023 661), offers sample units that form a "sensible" and "imaginative" approach to teaching English. The language and composition sections present activities for teaching writing that range from basic standard exercises to an examination of cartoons. The literature section discriminates among approaches to teaching literature at different grade levels and approaches to teaching the same grade. Features of the book that should be popular with students include the cross-genre discussions, the structuring of units to enable students to verbalize their own perceptions, and a variety of topics for class discussion and writing assignments. Other valuable features are the utilization of visual materials and the editors' detailed commentary and rating of numerous student writing samples. (LH)

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WHAT IS ENGLISH? WHAT SHOULD IT BE?

An Essay Review

ROBERT C. PARKER

12,000 Students and Their English Teachers, Tested Units in Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, by the Commission on English, College Entrance Examination Board, 1968. (Order from College Entrance Examination Board, Publications Order Office, Box 592, Princeton, N.J. 08540. $5.50.)

HOW many of us have talked in the past few months with new teachers fired up by a stimulating senior year, armed with boxes of fresh class notes reflecting the most recent scholarship, genuinely eager to excite and challenge youngsters? How often have we watched these teachers go into the fray eloquently prepared on *Huckleberry Finn* or *Moby Dick, Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth,* only to ask us after the first couple of classes, "What line of discussion can I use now to get their interest going?" or "What do I say to tenth-graders about this work, to twelfth-graders about that one?" They have found that many ideas they followed down intricate paths in an honors course have to be modified or recast in a secondary school classroom. But what these teachers lack in smooth running, efficient classes they make up for in energy and idealism.

By contrast, how many of us have talked with old-timers whose material is well organized and efficiently presented but whose classes lack the restlessness and vibrancy of their apprentices? These teachers have the great advantage of knowing what ways to learning work and what don't. By their experience, they know what to avoid in teaching *Hamlet* and what to emphasize. Some of them, however, tend to teach *Hamlet* the same way, year after year. At their worst, they treat books as something to be processed rather than savored. But what they lack in youthful vitality they make up for in experience.

Somewhere between these oversimplified poles lies a sensible, responsive teaching of English. The new book, *12,000 Students and Their English Teachers,* does much to fill the gap. With this remarkable volume, the Commission on English offers us a well-thought-out, imaginative, and well-tempered idea book. I use the term advisedly, though with some caution. While this book has many ideas for teaching English, they are all practical. They have all been tried and are presented here because they work. Also, the units do not form a teacher's manual, nor do they offer a complete course of study. The introduction makes clear that *12,000 Students . . .* is "only a sampling, a takeoff point" beyond which teachers should extend themselves and their classes. It reflects what English teaching at its best is and what it might be.

TWO-THIRDS of the book is devoted to literature and one-third to language and composition. The literature section is for the most part a blend of familiar school texts (*The Old Man and the Sea, A Separate Peace,* "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Rocking-Horse Winner," and "My Last Duchess") and some relatively new titles (*Stalky & Co.,* "Gooseberries," "Musée des Beaux Arts," and "Sonnet on Hope"). The editors' selections are generally of excellent quality and have high student appeal. What this part significantly lacks,

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though, is humor, which should show up in either the novel or the drama section. Perhaps this lack reflects the state of English everywhere; for more and more I hear teachers commenting on how preoccupied their reading lists are with death, identity crisis, violence, war, or social upheaval. These themes are essential and are reflected in much great literature, but they should not be stressed so that the comic is excluded. A unit on *Twelfth Night, Henry IV, Part I, Joseph Andrews,* or perhaps contemporary satirical poetry, would have been welcome.

One of the best features of *12,000 Students* . . . is its section on language and composition, which is a gold mine of varied and useful ideas for teaching writing. The techniques here are not new, but they are presented exceptionally well. They include nuts-and-bolts exercises like the one with the frightening title, "Applications of Grammatical Analysis to Stylistic Analysis and to Writing." This unit, although it involves many dry, mechanical operations, is an effective way to get students articulate about their own writing, as well as that of others. This section also offers more imaginative units, such as the one based on cartoons. Other units deal with diction, dictionary use, persuasion, and "The Language of the Essay."

The main usefulness of this book is that rather than offer tried-and-true methods, it provokes thought and discussion beyond its covers. Two examples come to mind from the section on the novel. First, there are two units on *The Old Man and the Sea,* one for the ninth grade and one for the twelfth. The aim is to make distinctions about what is appropriate and manageable for the younger students and what is proper for the older. In the first unit, emphasis (through a series of questions) is placed on understanding the main events of the story and the motivation of the characters. This unit avoids talk of symbolism and discussion of Hemingway's style. By contrast, the twelfth grade unit has elaborate questions about structure, style, interpretations, and symbolism. It is more detailed and expects more sophisticated judgment from its students. These two units (and this is what we mean when we say *12,000 Students* . . . is a taking-off point) have much to tell teachers and English departments about what their aims should be in a literature program. A similar combination of units on "My Last Duchess" appears in the poetry section.

Another interesting pair of units in the novel section is about *The Bridge of San Luis Rey.* Here, the editors make distinctions between two different methods of teaching a novel to the same grade. Both units are thorough and well written. The first is more traditional in its aspiration to teach the student that "there is more to a novel than plot." It is also traditional in the format of its discussion, which begins on page one and goes meticulously to the end. For each of the novel's five parts there are thoughtful, elaborate questions which attempt to lead the student to an understanding of the meaning and importance of tone, point of view, diction, imagery, and so on. However, the second unit suggests a different, less tenacious, less plodding approach. Here, the aim is "to see the book whole, then to examine its parts in relation to the whole, and finally to see it whole again." The questions are fewer than in the previous unit and allow for a looser, more far-reaching class discussion. In this unit, the student writing is done after the entire novel has been read. As with the questions for class discussion, the writing assignments are geared to understanding the whole. A comparison of the first writing assignments of the two units clarifies their different aims:

> Unit 1 Discuss the relationship of the last paragraph in Part One to the rest of Part One. Include an interpretation of the meaning of the paragraph and consider it in terms of Brother Juniper's ambition.
>
> Unit 2 Write a paper in which you point out and comment on the significant likenesses in the five people who fell with the bridge.

Examining the purposes behind each of these assignments (or better yet, the whole units) could lead to some lively and sometimes stormy English Department meetings.

I HAVE spoken of *12,000 Students* . . . as being more a point of departure than a point of rest. Another feature that gives it this quality is the use it makes of visual material in the form of painting, photographs, and cartoons. At reading this, some will raise the warning flags and speak of watering down the curriculum, as well as using a poor substitute for English. They should read through the three units which use these materials first. Of particular interest in this connection is the unit called "Attitude and Purpose in Writing." It centers on the choices every writer makes as an outcome of his attitude toward his subject and his purpose in writing. After the students have written two short descriptions of the same subject in different weather or at different times of day, they compare two photographs of Canterbury Cathedral (one black and white, one color; one taken from a

long distance, one fairly close up). The aim of looking at the photographs is to identify their main differences and to relate them to a possible purpose of the photographers. Next, the students study more sophisticated visual stimuli: two paintings depicting festive occasions ("The Fourteenth of July at Le Havre" by Dufy, and "The Adoration of the Magi" by Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi), and two photographs of buildings designed for different purposes (The Strozzi Palace and the *Petit Trianon).* The second writing assignment asks the students to write about the differences between two Monet paintings on the same subject. Finally, the emphasis shifts to paired writing samples, with three exercises ending in an extensive comparative analysis of two essays. The control of materials in this unit is excellent, and the student writing samples show that it worked.

So far, we have seen the value of *12,000 Students* . . . in terms of its helping teachers to discriminate among approaches to literature at different grade levels and approaches to teaching the same grade. We have also seen something of the book's resourceful use of visual aids. A further point of interest is the use made of small group work. We are all anxious to find ways of encouraging independent study among those we teach. In some of its units, *12,000 Students* . . . suggests using small groups within a class to explore new ideas as opposed to the more familiar question-and-answer dialogue run pretty much by the teacher. An imaginative example of this technique comes in the poetry unit on W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." Here, the class is divided into three groups. The unit gives detailed instructions for the areas of investigation of each group. One group explores the speaker, setting, and occasion of the poem. Another group concentrates on its "happenings and meanings." The third considers questions of language, structure, and tone. The students' work takes them outside of the poem to painting and mythology. Each student writes a paper based on his investigations, and each group ends its work with a presentation to the whole class. Other uses of small group work occur in the unit on *The Book of Job* and *J.B.* and in the sections on language and composition.

What makes all these units seem so convincing is the proof submitted by the editors in the form of student writing samples, which (along with the editors' comments) take up about half the space of the entire book. Most units average two writing assignments, and for every writing assignment there are three student papers, one rated *high,* one *average,* and one *low.* Each of the papers is followed by an editors' commentary, explaining in detail what qualities earned it its rating. The critiques are perceptive and honest. They would be of particular value to new teachers who want a feeling for what standards are currently used in English teaching and who want excellent models of exact, thorough comments on student work. These comments are helpful, too, in their frank judgment of controversial papers over which there was disagreement among the readers. Reading through this part of the book quickly alerts one to the fact (already noted) that this is a high-powered book which demands much from the students and teachers who use it.

SO FAR, I have emphasized only what benefits accrue to the teacher who uses this book, but as any reader would rightfully point out, I have reversed the emphasis made clear in the title. This is primarily a book designed with students in mind. What, from their point of view, does it offer? There is much, I think; but first let me sound a note of caution.

Any time a group of English teachers start talking curriculum and reading lists, the conversation most often turns to literary forms. What poems shall we read? What novels, short stories, drama, or essays? Most of us fall into this way of thinking, and properly so. It is a useful categorization and helps to insure that our students get a balanced exposure to these different types of literature. The trouble starts when we lock the English curriculum into this way of thinking. What happens then? The students in the upper grades spend their years hammering away at the novel for a month, drama for a month, poetry . . . each genre sealed into its proper term or semester. Naturally, the study of poetry *qua* poetry or novel *qua* novel for two or three years does a disservice to literature. Of course, a good English program should see that the different forms of literature are covered carefully, but once this is done, students should be encouraged to learn about literature in other contexts which would offer new and extended perceptions. For example, try pairing Wordsworth with Thoreau, *Macbeth* with *Moby Dick* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* or "The Bear" with "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Against this background of thinking, I saw the organization of *12,000 Students* . . . with some misgivings. It appeared to be inviting us to think in strictly formal terms for each of the three upper grades. But in the second unit on *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* the editors invite comparison with two Hardy poems, "Hap" and "The Subalterns." The unit on *The Book of Job* and *J.B.* also gets away from a strictly formal or generic study. The unit on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" invites exploration of that poem's many allusions.

From the student's point of view, this variety of approach is welcome. Even more use might have been made of it.

Another feature which should appeal to students is that the units are structured so that they can discover their own perceptions. Students commonly complain of teachers' questions to which answers are well anticipated and firmly glued on or of questions which run such a tight course that there is no chance to reach conclusions which are dissenting or even slightly modified from those set by the teacher. The units in this book encourage expansive and even risky thinking. We are told in the introduction, and it is born out in the text, that the main idea of some units may not appear in print. The editors have rightfully chosen to emphasize the process of discovery rather than the goal, the thinking through and testing rather than the final perception. The units on Joyce's "The Dead" and Thomas' "Fern Hill" are particularly fine examples of this. Another feature of the units which students will like is the variety in the format of class discussions and in the writing assignments. I argued this summer with two products of college preparatory curricula that while they had withstood the rigors of their respective schools well, they were, as far as I could see, missing a very important quality. They could not talk about books without soon falling into a mechanical intellectual banter. They used all the right terms and handled them well, but any feeling for literature or sense of wonder at it was just about absent. They argued that four years of rigorous training in literary analysis geared to a 700 verbal aptitude and a 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement examination had effectively made it impossible for them to respond to literature with much real feeling or emotion. They were victims of operation overteach, perceptive and efficient but far too clinical.

THE editors of *12,000 Students . . .*, in one of their comments on student writing, say that "textual analysis isn't the only way to get at a student's understanding of a work of literature." This book's discussions of and questions about literature, with all their exactness and thoroughness, never lose contact with the feelings of the students. Furthermore, the book offers imaginative respite for students such as the two I talked with in the way it alternates between writing assignments which are expository (often analytical) and imaginative. Even the former offer an occasional change from the expected. For example, after a very. thorough analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* (twelfth grade), an optional assignment asks the student to give a "detailed, thoughtful, honest" answer to the question, "As a literary work, how good is it?" The section on the short story makes frequent use of imaginative writing assignments following an analytical discussion. For instance, discussion of "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (grades 11 and 12) is thorough, including questions about character, theme, and language. The first writing assignment reads,

> Write a story of at least 500 words in which you convey a change from one subtle but intense mood to another through very simple language.

Students will also find much in the previously discussed units on writing to allow their hearts expression along with their minds.

This book's usefulness to teachers of English, young and old, is incalculable. Its ideas, used ambitiously, would be welcomed enthusiastically by students. It was intended, we are told, to "aim high." Indeed it did.