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A case is made for the assigned reading of ancient and modern literary classics, rather than modern essay collections, in college freshman composition classes. The effectiveness of a number of classics used for that purpose for 13 years in the freshman courses at Haverford College is discussed. Classwork in the Haverford program is described, and a sample 2-semester reading list is supplied. (AF)

Good Writing from Great Books

JOHN ASHMEAD

EACH FALL, along with the box of Christmas grapefruit a devoted relative sends me, I receive from publishers sample copies of the most recent modern essay collections, intended for use as texts in composition courses. These anthologies are serviceable enough—indeed one of my own essays is included in just such a text, and I have heard from a teacher in Washington, D.C., that it is especially beneficial with foreign students.

Some of these essays are—like my own, I say hopefully—intended as models; others analyze troubles with semantics and mass communications and logic. One essay that I can still recall vividly discussed the logic of bees. Just as my Christmas grapefruit are guaranteed "fresh," so these essays are guaranteed "updated," and these texts must be among the most rapidly changing in the profession.

No doubt one can learn a great deal about the logic of essay writing by studying an essay on the logic of bees, though the essay I have in mind has been superseded by a more recent study of thinking in the hive. But what does one gain by shifting most, if not all of one's assigned reading in a composition course in the direction of classics, whether ancient or modern?

The Indian *Panchatantra*, of the second century A.D., one of the oldest collections of short stories in the world, is one of the classical great books I have in mind, as intriguing reading for a composition class. Let us assume we have a class made up of about equal numbers of future scientists and future humanists, as often happens in such classes. We may now turn to the story, 'The Lion-Makers'—even if texts are not readily available for the whole class it is short enough to be read aloud.

'The Lion-Makers' tells of four youths, three of whom were scientists while the fourth had only his sense, meaning his common sense, to rely on. During their travels in search of riches the four youths found a dead lion in the jungle. The first youth, eager to demonstrate his scientific learning, put the bones of the

The author of "The Man with Only One Suit," HARPER'S, *April* 1963, *Mr. Ashmead teaches at Haverford College.*

lion back together. The second scientist added flesh and blood and a new skin. The third scientist was about to give the lion the breath of life, when the youth who had only his good sense called out, "Stop! Don't you realize you are making a lion?"

The third scientist replied, "Are you asking me to call a halt to my research?"

"Wait a moment then," said the solitary non-scientist, "I'm looking for a good tall tree to climb."

The three scientists worked happily away at their joint research project, which came to its conclusion when they brought their lion to life and he ate them up. After the lion departed, well satisfied with his creators, the non-scientist, whom I call Sense, came down from his tree and went safely home.

As a start I might well propose this composition topic for 'The Lion-Makers' —"Were the scientists really in the wrong?" With any sort of discussion at all, a great many other topics will occur. And there is the possibility of writing imitations, continuations, or alternate versions of the story.

A by-product of assignments on great books, such as this one, is the reflection that even quite old classics, and I have deliberately chosen a very old one indeed, have much to tell us about the age of $E=mc^2$.

If I turn to one of the composition texts, an essay collection, which I have just received, I find that one of the short reading selections (actually a chapter of an unpublished Ph.D. thesis), is entitled: "The Content Characteristics of Best-Selling Novels." The suggested theme topic, for the usual 500 word essay, is to write an essay on the content characteristics of recent novels you have read.

Of my two proposed texts and topics, I can hardly believe that the one on content characteristics of novels is going to bring forth a vital, engaged piece of student writing. Nor will it seriously disturb the fuzzy thinking or the mixed-up beliefs which are the source of much bad student writing. But our "Lion-Makers' topic, coming as it does from the heart of a great and enduring work of literature, is almost certain to wake up and to challenge those who write on it.

Before I mention some specific student reactions, I wish to outline here our 13-year effort at Haverford College, begun by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, and still in progress, to find those great books which readily call forth good Freshman English writing.

Not all classics are suitable as sources of student writing, but we have found the words of Montaigne pertinent: "All the world knows me in my book," said Montaigne, "and my book in me." The book with some style, with some sense of the author, is likely to do very well.

And we have found that very fine quality is essential. As Nietzsche said in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Books for the general reader are always ill-smelling books, the odour of paltry people clings to them." We must have the voices of great people, to call forth the best writing of our students. And indeed, as Plato advocated in the *Phaedrus*, to call forth their virtue.

In the past 31 years or so, we have assigned about 60 different authors for a week or more. If we included many short poetry assignments, another 40 authors would have to be added. Ours is a small college—one English visitor once called it the last 18th century handmill of American education. But even so we can look back at the staggering total of 100 authors, and some 44,000 freshman themes of 500 words each—for a grand total of 22,000,000 words, a wordage produced by a freshman class which has rarely gone over 130 men.

Our selection of works is affected somewhat because our students must take further work in Biblical literature, in Shakespeare, or in humanities courses in western literature, and so our listings reflect some attempt to avoid unwise duplication.

Students discuss their ancient and modern classics in sections of 12 or 24 men for two class periods a week. For their third weekly class period they form into groups of four students each, called tutorials, and in these tutorials one or two students read their 500 word essays aloud for the criticism of their fellows, under the guidance of their class instructor. For a long time I myself believed that tutorial was the decisive process in the success of the course. But I now feel that our choice of great books is as important as our tutorials.

What classics then meet our requirement, that they call forth, without much need for background lecturing, good student essays? And that they seem richer, or perhaps more controversial, on rereading?

Let me begin with those works which have been outstandingly successful in calling forth good student essays. These are Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* [all 13 years], Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* [11 years—but probably the most successful single work in the course as a terminal book], Malraux, *Man's Fate* [12 years], Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* [11 years], Miller, *Death of a Salesman* [only six years, but steadily since its introduction.]

What have been student reactions to these works? Again and again, in reaction to Lawrence's novel, I have seen student essays that center on the theme of how one sensibly establishes independence from one's family. *Huck Finn*, which we use in part to suggest the difference between college and high school standards of reading, always raises the question of how far one accepts the code of one's elders—especially if that code approves of slavery in its many forms. The Grand Inquisitor passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* reawakes students who have become rhetorically numb on the subject of state control for the sake of good life. *Death of a Salesman* shocks our future installment buyers into an awareness that they may be about to sell their lives on the monthly payment plan for articles they will never live to own.

Man's Fate, with its opening and stunning act of assassination, calls forth essays on the meaning of tragedy in modern, life, as does *Huck Finn* on the meaning of comedy.

I think few would question the fact that these are first rate works of art; they have the further advantage that there is almost never any trouble in finding subjects for themes, subjects to which the students bring a deep commitment and urge to understand.

Very nearly as successful, and for much the same reasons, are these: Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', [8 years], Shaw, *Major Barbara* [7 years], Fry, *The Lady's Not for Burning* [7 years]. The concrete proverbs of Emerson, the ironic wit of Shaw, the poetic metaphors of Fry, are all very much appreciated by student writers, and so the style of this group is a surprising but gratifying part of their popularity. It is clear from student writing about these works that student style benefits from such models, without much conscious urging from the instructor.

Equally successful, as fine literature which also stimulates good student essays, are several of the works of Joyce: *Dubliners* [5 years], and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [4 years]. These works come to life under close reading and discussion. Joyce's work is always a revelation to students of how finely worked the best writing invariably is. From my student essays I have learned

as well what a romantic writer Joyce is; they always write essays on the girls in these stories.

Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* perhaps belongs with this second group of highly successful works, though we have used it for 8 years in a rather special way, as the source of an essay written under examination conditions, and without class discussion of the text. The students would like to have *Catcher* back, but the staff has reached the limits of critical tolerance. Our experience with Salinger reminds me of Yeats's anguish on hearing 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' recited out loud by an assembly of 10,000 Irish Sea Scouts.

With poetry we have found that we get better results by giving instructor and section a wide range of choice, from anthologies such as Oscar Williams, *Immortal Poems* and from Untermeyer, *Modern American and British Poetry.* Poetry is perhaps too personal a matter to be taught successfully on a mass assignment basis. Some poets and poetic works have been assigned two or three times now: Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Whitman, *Song of Myself*, Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Emily Dickinson, selected poems, Robert Frost, selected poems, Eliot, 'Prufrock,' Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales,* Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' On the whole, it is my impression that Blake, Whitman, Dickinson, Eliot and Frost have had the greatest appeal. However chaotic our approach, it was encouraging at a recent poetry contest to discover that almost ten per cent of the College is secretly or openly writing poetry.

In addition to works of unquestioned success in the framework of a composition course, and in addition to poetry, which has its own special problems, one remaining group of works has been successful in producing student essays, but even so these have not been assigned more than five times at the most.

These works include: Shakespeare, one play (*The Tempest, Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra, Macbeth, Hamlet*), Sophocles, *Theban Plays,* Melville, *Billy Budd,* Maugham, *Moon and Sixpence,* A. Huxley, *Brave New World,* Laotse, *The Wisdom of Laotse,* Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought,* Russell, 'A Free Man's Worship,' R. L. Stevenson, 'Pulvis et Umbra,' T. H. Huxley, *Selected Essays,* C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* or *The Screwtape Letters,* Plato, *The Apology* or the *Phaedrus,* More, *Utopia,* Montaigne, *Essays.*

Shakespeare may require more background, more time, and perhaps more literary worship than is possible in a composition class, always a somewhat irreverent proceeding. This group obviously includes more tendentious works, though I can recall many more anecdotes about essays from its assignments. I particularly remember one lad, a premedical student, who submitted a letter to his girl as his essay for the week. In it he announced his intention to go to Africa and join Schweitzer when he completed his medical work. His poor girl wrote back a rather cautious answer—she was pretty clearly hoping for a maturer judgment. This student had expected praise for his essay, but the fellow members of his tutorial took him to pieces for rhetorical hypocrisy; next they explored the ethics of testing one's girl by a piece of prose advocating a position that was not the author's. I have never witnessed a better demonstration of the need for the simultaneous practice of ethical and rhetorical sincerity.

As I reflect on the reading of this course, I am comforted by the fact that I can think of only three unquestionable failures, of all the books we chose. These were Lewis's *Arrowsmith,* which seemed to get thinner every time we talked about it, in two years of use, and Skin-

ner's *Walden* II and Lilienthal's *TVA*, both of which were too weakly written for use in a writing course.

At first we had a very elaborate framework for our reading assignments. Every modern work was paired with a work of classical times, and we had a great many categories: The Personal Career, Social Action and Goals, The Good Life, Psychological Drives and the Dream, Tragic Tensions and Comic Releases, The Beautiful. We quickly abandoned our doubly yoked ancients and moderns, and we reduced the categories to three: The Inner Life, The Outer Life, The Good (or Complete) Life. Then we decided that it was better not to state these categories on the reading lists, but use these three, informally, for he first semester only. A characteristic reading list, that of 1961-62 is as follows:

FIRST SEMESTER

Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (2 wks)
Butler, *Way of All Flesh* (2)
Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1)
Poetry readings, chosen by the instructor (2)
Thoreau, 'Life without Principle' (1)
Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist* (2)
Examination book: Golding, *Lord of the Flies*)

SECOND SEMESTER

Malraux, *Man's Fate* (2 wks)
Sophocles, *Theban Plays* (2)
Poetry readings (2)
Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* (3)
Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (2)
Cary, *The Horse's Mouth* (2)
Examination book: Camus, *The Plague*

It would be a rare student who would not be moved to tighten up and revise his assumptions about life, logic and literature, by at least half the books on such a list. I come back to the point at which I began. Which work is more likely to stimulate committed student writing, Malraux's *Man's Fate*—or any other work on this list,—or an unpublished Ph.D. chapter on content characteristics of best-sellers?

Men everywhere in the world now dance on the edge of a volcano. Can we bear to read or write about trivia when the greatest voices of the past and present would eagerly talk with us?

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