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Reading Maketh a Full Man

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Abstract

My freshman class rejoices. It is our first meeting and I do not ask the apprehensive matriculants to write the traditional autobiographical essay to probe their linguistic and literary aptitudes. Before dismissing the class, I assign a reading—"My Wood" by E. M. Forster—for the next meeting.

READING MAKETH A FULL MAN

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What do you read my lord?
Words, words, words.

Hamlet

My freshman class rejoices. It is our first meeting and I do not ask the apprehensive matriculants to write the traditional autobiographical essay to probe their linguistic and literary aptitudes. Before dismissing the class, I assign a reading—"My Wood" by E. M. Forster—for the next meeting.

"Is there a written exercise?" asks a frowning, naive miss. The class groans but she is undismayed by the mass disapprobation of her finkish intervention.

"No, not this time. But read the essay carefully. We'll talk about it on Wednesday."

On Wednesday I walk into class, drop a freshly duplicated pack of papers on my desk, and scan the troubled faces of a class that thinks itself betrayed. When the bell rings, I begin to pass the papers to the angry multitude. A belligerent hand seeks my attention. It belongs to the girl with the corrugated brow.

"Dr. Blinderman, you said nothing to us on Monday about a test. All you asked us to do was to read the essay by Mr. Forster."

Poor girl. They had probably briefed her. Now, she had to trim her sails to atone for her almost unpardonable sin of Monday.

"Miss Frella, please read the instructions on the top of your dittoed page." Education had begun. Miss Frella and her bellicose comrades would have a rhetorical head start this semester.

The class listens as Miss Frella reads:

I have extracted the words in the following list from Mr. Forster's essay, "My Wood," a piece of literature which you have undoubtedly read with care and pleasure. As evidence of your concerned reading, please define the uncapitalized words and identify or define the capitalized words. No, you will not be graded this time, but . . .

Miss Frella sits down, looks at the list for a moment, stares at me unbelievably, and turns to her disconcerted classmates for solace.

"Well, what is it?" I ask, noting the motionless pens.

No response. Silently, the boys and girls begin to joust with

Forster's formidable checkmates. I can predict the casualties. There aren't many pens skimming. In half an hour I collect the sorry manuscripts from my band of defeated pawns. Before the day is over, I tabulate the results:

<i>Word</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Correct Responses</i>	<i>Incorrect Responses</i>	<i>Incorrect References</i>
cheque	28	27	1	
bracken	6	2	4	
Foxglove	9	5	4	
parable	24	20	4	
effect	26	22	4	
crystalline	20	16	4	
antithesis	18	10	8	
avaricious	9	4	5	
carnal	13	4	9	
asceticism	3	0	3	
grub	26	4	1	21
Fourteen-stone				
Bishop	6	2	4	
Tolstoy	19	16	3	
Ahab	21	5	7	9
Canute	5	2	3	
Alexander	24	22	2	
Dante	27	14	13	
Dives	4	2	2	
Lazarus	18	14	3	1
Bolshies	9	7	1	1
Sirius	15	7	8	
Bathe in the Jordan	24	2	2	20
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	354	207	95	52

I distribute these tabulations to the class on Friday. To lighten the embarrassment of the class, I bid them put aside the statistics for a few minutes to listen to some unique definitions and identifications that I culled from the lot:

Jordan: A very in place during Bible times. (But it's still here)

Sirius: Place of the sirens.

Bathe in the Jordan: Indians bathe in the Jordan River. They feel it cleanses the soul. Like going to Mecca.

Dives: Crummy bars.

Tolstoy: Wrote a *Tale of Two Cities*.

Lazarus: A person in Greek mythology who invented fire and wound up by having crows pick at his liver while he was in Hades.

Ahab: Son of Christ; An Arab servant.

Dante: A Renaissance painter; a rider; a lover.

Canute: Canute Rockne

carnal: Artery or vein in the body.

parable: A large building or structure; something eatable.

Bolshies: A Russian general.

foxgloves: In the winter these little animals wear these on their paws. (Inventive)

fourteen-stone bishop: fourteen priests smoking pot; fourteen high priests.

I do not repress the laughter that greets each of the errant identifications; there will be time for serious application to word study later. I now ask for reasons for this dismal tabulation and there is a spontaneous response to my query. I list them randomly—almost in the order that the students speak:

1. I do not like to look up words when I read. This spoils the pleasure of reading.
2. You didn't tell us that you would test us. When I know I'm not going to be tested, I don't read carefully.
3. I skimmed the essay.
4. What's the use of knowing all the facts in an essay? I get the main idea without looking up each word I don't know.
5. I don't have a good dictionary.
6. The dictionary doesn't give you enough information.
7. I looked up Jordan, but what does "bathe in the Jordan" mean? How do you know what the author has in mind?
8. I found two Ahabs. How can I tell which one the author means?
9. What's the good of reading something I'll forget? You gave no written assignment. I need a written assignment to get me interested in facts.

From these apparently sincere responses to my query I formulated the following hypotheses, some of which are only too familiar to teachers of English:

1. Many students do not care to read, do not know how to read, and probably will read very little after their graduation.
2. Students will read carefully if they are grade conscious.
3. Because skimming has become a vogue, lazy students believe that

- they have found a panacea in this frequently destructive practice.
4. Some students don't have dictionaries; others don't know how to use dictionaries; and some rely upon skimpy paper-back editions.
 5. A lesson will succeed if its objectives are stated meaningfully to the reader. Furthermore, the learner must be able to demonstrate through performance that he has mastered the objectives of the teacher.¹ (Obviously, an assignment that merely directs the student to read an essay has poor objectives. But, for the aim I had in mind, the assignment I gave was purposely defective.)

When a college English teacher faces his freshman class of assorted readers, it is too late for him to blast the parents, teachers, and administrators whom he blames for his predicament. Once past the admission's barriers, the student is a matriculant who deserves the teacher's professional guidance, not his vindictiveness borne of frustration with unrealistic numbers of frequently illiterate freshmen. Although the responses to my first reading assignment revealed the cultural impoverishment of most of my freshmen, I decided to regard them as potential lovers of the word, an assumption that I had to make to quell my intuitive skepticism.

Crash programs in education are sometimes practical, often disastrous, and rarely as effective as well designed programs having valid objectives which can be demonstrably achieved. But how can one bring the word to American boys and girls who have studied in the lower schools for twelve years without acquiring a reasonably effective reservoir of words for their practical and cultural engagements?

There has to be a beginning. I ask my class to bring a good dictionary to class on Monday. I explain that we will use the dictionary often throughout the semester. I do not ask them to check the words from Forster's essay. On Monday, I explain the purpose of the lesson: Mr. Forster is an English novelist of distinction. Some of you may have read his *Passage to India* in high school. Others may have seen the television rerun of the movie adaptation of the novel. Because Mr. Forster is a scholarly writer, he sometimes refers to historical, religious, scientific, and literary names and events in his writing to emphasize a point or to make a significant comparison or contrast. For example, when Mr. Forster states that "Ahab did not want that vineyard," he is referring to the Biblical King Ahab and not to Captain

1. Robert F. Mager, *Preparing Educational Objectives* (Palo Alto: Fearon Publishers, 1962), p. 10.

Ahab of *Moby Dick*. Only five of thirty students knew that the Ahab associated with a vineyard is the Biblical Ahab. Should not curiosity have led some of you to the dictionary for quick enlightenment? Let's check the dictionary now for Ahab: "Ahab—a king of Israel in the 9th century B.C." Helpful, but not sufficiently helpful. Yet, we know that Ahab was a Biblical king. Now, I have a Biblical dictionary² in my library. Here it is. Let's check Ahab again. This greedy king, the husband of Jezebel, a name you probably know, had a taste for splendid architecture. "Desiring to add to his pleasure-grounds at Jezreel the vineyard of his neighbor Naboth, he proposed to buy it or give land in exchange for it; and when this was refused by Naboth, a false accusation of blasphemy was brought against him and not only was he himself stoned to death, but his sons also . . ."! Now do you see the effectiveness of Mr. Forster's allusion to Ahab and the vineyard? And to his tongue-in-cheek reference to his inability to murder Mrs. Hennessey? True, we had to use several reference books to identify Ahab; the dictionary at first for a ready reference; a specialized dictionary next for a specific identification. Our library has specialized dictionaries of all kinds, but for home use, your college dictionary serves as a basic interpreter of unfamiliar words. Sometimes you will have to use a little imagination; only seven students knew who the 'Bolshies' are. Our dictionary defines "Bolshevik;" why should the transition from this word to its slang form be so difficult? The phrase, "bathe in the Jordan," however, presents a difficult problem of interpretation to all but two of you. The dictionary mentions two Jordan Rivers; the first in Utah; the second in the Middle East. Obviously, Mr. Forster has in mind the storied river which has fascinated men from Biblical times to the present. But why can't he accept an invitation to dinner or "take a bathe in the Jordan" now that he is a man of property? This is a tricky question, but if you are familiar with Luke, you will recall that Christ was baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. This, a propertied man can't do because he has material bonds that limit his freedom. Of course, Forster exaggerates, but his implication that only independent men can move freely in society might be worth debating. Thoreau, too, said similar things in *Walden*.

To sum up, I invite you to use the dictionary to help you to read more meaningfully, to enable you to add new words and concepts

2. William Smith, *A Dictionary of the Bible*. (New York: American Book Exchange, n.d.), p. 22.

to your intellectual store, and to make your reading more pleasurable as your comprehension increases. If the dictionary cannot be helpful in some instances, its usefulness in most of your verbal investigations will overshadow the occasional frustrations that “take a bathe in the Jordan” ambiguities bring you. But a few minutes with the dictionary will clarify “avaricious,” “carnal,” and “ascetism.” A few more minutes will inform you that Tolstoy was a Russian writer, that Dante wasn’t a French painter, and that a fourteen-stone-bishop weighs 196 pounds.

We shall read fourteen stories and essays this semester. Think of the intellectual riches that you can store up in one semester if you read profitably. And you can apply this simple technique to all of your reading. Why not become equal to the artist that you are reading at the moment? Enjoy his writing and borrow his mind. Make his words and learning your own.

Now for Wednesday’s assignment. Please read, “I Won’t Pay for the Trip: No Chemical Routes to Paradise,” by Jonathan Miller, M.D. I have prepared a list of definitions of the difficult words in the essay. Refer to the list as you read the article. Report Wednesday on the usefulness of this list as you read Dr. Miller’s challenging essay.

Word List: “I Won’t Pay for the Trip . . .”

1. cataclysm—a momentous and violent event marked by overwhelming upheaval and demolition; see disaster.
2. catastrophe—a momentous tragic event; utter failure.
3. *deja vue*—*paramnesia*: the illusion of remembering scenes or events when experienced for the first time.
4. *deliquescent*—to become soft or liquid with age; to divide repeatedly ending in fine divisions—used esp. of the veins of a leaf. (Which definition seems to apply?)
5. *euphoria*—an often unaccountable feeling of well-being or elation.
6. *metaphysical*—highly abstract; supernatural; pertaining to the supersensible. (Check this word carefully)
7. *oblivion*—an act or instance of forgetting; the quality or state of being forgotten.
8. *primaeval*—of or relating to the earliest ages. (Sometimes spelled as *primeval*.)
9. *quotidian*—occurring every day; daily.
10. *retrospective*—relating to the process of surveying the past.
11. *Chesterton*—English author and journalist, 1874-1936.

12. Gallic—of or relating to Gaul or France.
13. Gare du Nord—The North Station.
14. Xanadu—Country mentioned by Coleridge in his poem, “Kubla Khan.”

On the following Wednesday, we discuss “I Won’t Pay for the Trip.” Some are skeptical about the doctor’s insistence that “once the muscles of the mind are in tune, very small changes of sensation, mood, climate, or interest can produce quite startling alterations on consciousness.” I dare not ask whether they have ever “got a glimpse of Xanadu through the thick poison clouds of nausea,” although there are several volunteers who would like to emulate Coleridge in class.

“Was the list I gave you on Friday helpful?” I ask apprehensively. A chorus of “ayes” assures me that it was.

“Will you submit to a quick recognition test?”

Groans. Then, a subdued, resigned, and mumbled assent.

In five minutes the test is over. I am pleased; the catastrophe of Wednesday has been averted. The words have been regarded, studied in context, and remembered. They are delighted with *deja vue* and its English version, *paramnesia*. So many of them had known this feeling; so few of them had known its name. I feel certain that they will talk of *deja vue* and *paramnesia* for some time.

The third step in my plan to encourage word study among lexically apathetic students is a joint class enterprise. I want to reinforce their quickening interest in mastering all unfamiliar words they encounter in an assigned reading. I entertain modest hopes that these conditioning lessons will be more productive than the rote practice of memorizing the meanings of difficult words.

On Friday, I have copies of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, Freud’s *Basic Writings*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Keat’s *Poems*, and Bulfinch’s *Mythology* on my desk. I pass them along to the students and ask them to skim through them as I write the following words on the blackboard:

Dr. Jekyll	Orpheus	compensatory
Mr. Hyde	Vance Packard	supermundane
John Dewey	adrenalin	coeval
Freud	noradrenalin	voluptuous
Keats	pecuniary	Mermaid Tavern
Pavlov	insidious	Nuremberg (Hitler)
Diana	machinations	Paleolithic

There is interest in the books and in the words on the blackboard.

Dictionaries are being consulted. The process is catching on.

“The words on the blackboard are from Aldous Huxley’s essay, ‘The Art of Selling.’ Again, note how a master writer utilizes words from many disciplines to enrich his thesis. What fields do some of these words refer to?”

Collectively, the class finds Huxley familiar with philosophy, psychology, medicine, mythology, literature, history, finance, and advertising. A handful associate Nuremberg with Hitler; three hands identify the Mermaid Tavern, and one boy identified Dewey as an easygoing educator. The dictionary doesn’t define noradrenalin; it doesn’t include Vance Packard; and it doesn’t associate Nuremberg with Hitler. But the class is surprised to find the fictional Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the general body of the book.

The value of this vocabulary lesson is that it prepares the student for his reading of the essay. He is now armed with ready references for a meaningful reading of the essay. The dictionary gives him an initial identification of the troublesome term; if he is not content with the streamlined definition of Diana, for example, he can find more satisfying the “queen and huntress, chaste and fair,” in *Bulfinch* or in dictionaries of mythology. Occasionally, the dictionary is not helpful to the student; for example, even the better college dictionaries might not include a reference to the Mermaid Tavern, and if the passage does not offer reasonable contextual clues to the student, the teacher must then identify the term.

In brief, then, this tripartite introduction to word study in the freshman composition course that includes readings illustrative of the rhetorical principles stressed, should motivate the student to concern himself with word mastery. The first lesson makes him uncomfortably aware that he reads without profit when he avoids exploration of unfamiliar words and expressions; the second lesson reinforces the first by illustrating to him how much more meaningful a literary selection can be if it has a ready glossary at hand for each assigned reading; and the third lesson reinforces the aims of the preceding lessons by having him prepare his own glossary of difficult terms for each selection. I like to think of the first lesson as “the shock of recognition;” the second as “linguistic therapy;” and the third as “self-discovery.” If the first triad of lessons doesn’t succeed, I suggest a continuation of the methodology until the students themselves become competent and willing word sleuths. Perhaps they will never again have a confrontation with the infrequently occurring brackens, quotidians, or deliquescents that we investigated earlier,

but I doubt that few forget the Biblical Ahab, the fourteen-stone-Bishop, and the Dives who might have frequented “a crummy bar.”

Of course, in years to come, many of my students will suffer from paramnesia (*deja vue*). Perhaps, as they come across a troublesome word they will sense an intuitive uneasiness of having been there before.