

# Writing Humanistically

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One of the perennial problems of English teachers is how to integrate the teaching of composition skills effectively into a course where instructional time is predominantly concerned with the teaching of literature. The **Humanities** course at Ann Arbor's Pioneer High School is a classic example of a course in which this problem exists both because the course surrounds the **Humanities** teacher with an abundance of "content"--not only in literature but in art, music, and intellectual history as well--and because the chronological momentum of this team-taught course discourages leisurely dalliance at the individual teacher's whim.

**Humanities** thus especially exemplifies a course in which instructors must create writing assignments which require students to make rhetorical decisions while writing about literature. If a student can tell about the plight of Hecuba and her ladies from Odysseus' point of view, he has entered imaginatively into Euripides' tragedy of the Trojan Women. Not only does this assignment require a higher degree of empathetic involvement than a "straight" critical analysis, but it also forces writers to deal with the rhetorical problem of adjusting voice and diction.

I do not mean to emphasize a kind of gimmicky pseudo-creativity over straightforward criticism. The latter is very important and probably constitutes at least half of the students' writing. However, a dual description of a given object or scene, written from the point of view of Charles Bovary and then of Emma has triple value: it provides a structured rhetorical exercise that asks students to make comparisons and contrasts; it requires students to demonstrate that they do in fact understand the clash between Romanticism and Realism; and it allows students to create

truly sympathetic responses to a major work of literature.

The nature of the material taught in **Humanities** also lends itself to assignments in which the tone and the audience for the students' writing may be effectively structured. While students are required to understand the content of the course if they are to successfully fulfill assignments such as the illustrative ones that follow, they are also asked to think about the material in what may be new and creative ways. Here are several assignments which ask students to write about the content of the course for particular audiences, purposes, and occasions.

- a. A parent has complained about the immorality of the Canterbury Tales. Defend its use in our curriculum. (The assignment could include a letter of complaint from a parent to the School Board itemizing certain specific objections to the work.)
- b. Write a letter to the head of the Curriculum Committee explaining why a certain book should be included in the course. (This writing task is a good method for supplementary reading.)
- c. We have just finished our study of the British Romantic poets. We had two purposes during this unit of study: to understand the basic elements of Romanticism as an intellectual and artistic movement of the nineteenth century and to develop and practice skills in reading poetry. Suppose that we can use only five poems next year to accomplish these purposes. Based on your extensive study of this material, write me a letter identifying the five poems you feel would best accomplish our stated goals.

Each of these assignments requires students to demonstrate knowledge of subject matter: They cannot make their case effectively with vague generalizations,

mere plot summary, or careless inaccuracies. The specified writing situations give them clear purposes and audiences. Their task is defined: They are forced to make rhetorical decisions about the voice in which they will speak, the tone they will assume, and the diction they will choose.

The following examples demonstrate another kind of assignment that pulls students directly into a work of literature through written role-playing. Assignments such as these also accomplish the dual purposes for which the teacher of composition in a literature-oriented class strives.

- a. Create a conversation between two of the Canterbury pilgrims. Make sure that their characters are revealed as they talk.
- b. Write an interview with Faust suitable for publication in...Time?...the Ann Arbor News?... Playboy? (Not only will students have to decide what current topics might interest Faust and what his opinions might be, but they will also have to choose their audience and write in a style appropriate for that audience.)
- c. You are Ophelia, back in your room after witnessing the Mousetrap Play. What will you write in your diary?

On the whole I have had great success with such writing assignments: Students seem to find them both interesting and challenging, and I have received writing from students that is both of good quality and fun to read--not an insignificant bonus! I am not suggesting that they always work, however. One of the most dismal group of papers I ever received was the result of asking students to create a conversation between Candide and Faust on some contemporary issue. I have never figured out why it did not

work: It was no more fanciful than many others. I was expecting discussions of such topics as feminism, abortion, nuclear power, ecology, governmental corruption, or racism, in which the somewhat satirical, rather conservative voice of neo-classicism would contrast with the more idealistic, and revolutionary voice of romanticism.

Either students did not really understand the implications of the assignment or the subtleties of tone were too difficult for them to compose or, perhaps, Faust and Candide just did not have much to say to each other. I am not sure the idea is worth refining although it still fascinates me. Maybe I had the wrong people, maybe Hamlet and Raskolnikov? Emma Bovary and Nora Helmer? (Now they should have something to talk about!)

My commitment to creating composition assignments like these in a literature class was validated recently when I asked my students to write a proper obituary for Browning's Bishop of St. Praxed's. They immediately saw the problem: how to write an appropriate obituary and still reveal what they had to show me they knew about the Bishop. Not only did they solve the problem in a variety of clever and interesting ways, but they were also excited by the challenge to do so. They talked about it with each other, mentioned it to other teachers, and eagerly shared their results with the class, insisting that I read aloud the entire group of papers.

The following student texts illustrate their efforts:

The Bishop of Saint Praxed's church died yesterday in the presence of his nephews about whom it is said the Bishop felt quite paternally. Before his death he made arrangements for his tomb which typify his personality. His wishes are to be buried on the

epistle side of the pulpit. These request are quite appropriate as he held such a distinguished position. This position will be directly across from his dear friend and predecessor, Bishop Gandolf, that they might be eternally close. The service will be held on June 16; all mourners are welcome. Flowers may be sent directly to the church. All donations should be tossed into the tomb before the final closing by request of the Bishop.

#### Obituary for the Bishop

Yesterday in Rome the Bishop of Saint Praxed's Church, who for many weeks had been quite sick in bed, passed away. He was well-known for his interests in the Church, of course, as well as in Greek mythology and the Italian Renaissance. He spoke his last words to Anselm, the young man who recently came into a great deal of wealth upon the discovery of a hidden surplus of lapis lazuli. Anselm claims that the Bishop, who has never been concerned with materialistic things, wishes to be buried in a simple casket, his only request in regard to that casket being a wish for it to be placed as close to that of Old Gandolf as possible. The Bishop is survived by no one, but his death is mourned by the Church as well as Anselm and Anselm's brothers, who were like sons to the deceased and are also the inheritors of his wealth.

As they wrote about the Bishop, students learned and communicated a great deal about him: they also learned more about rhetorical stance, voice, audience, and diction, than they would have in a week's class discussions and instruction about these elements of effective writing.

Some of the most consistently successful writing assignments in **Humanities** are those which ask students to create their own modern versions of classical forms. These assignments help students explore connections between the past and present--one of the main purposes of the course.

For example, after reading the Odyssey and either Oedipus or the Trojan Women and exploring the concept of mythology and the purposes for which various writers use mythology, I ask students to create their own myths. Among my favorites of the myths I have received over the years are an explanation that the Edmund Fitzgerald sank in Lake Superior

due to Hades' anger because it was hauling ore stolen from his underground realm; an account of Odysseus' awakening in modern Greece to discover it was taken over by rightist totalitarian generals; and a wonderful summary of the politics of southeastern Michigan--the besieging of the DeTroiyans by an angry coalition of Suburban armies.

When we study Plato, I ask students for an original Socratic dialogue on a current controversial topic:

Prove in a Socratic dialogue that abortion is (not) morally acceptable; that creationism should (not) be taught in the schools; that women are (not) inherently inferior to men; that 18-year-olds should (not) be allowed to vote (drink).

The only limit to topics for this assignment is the mutual creativity of students and teacher. As young writers fulfill the assignment, they not only have to explore the issue's pros and cons within a strict logical framework, but they also have to recognize that their rhetorical decisions have to be consistent and appropriate. Best of all, while the assignment's structure gives students a clear purpose, it allows for a great deal of creativity and wit.

One student wrote the following satiric piece after reading Plato's Phaedo:

#### The Tough Tony

An Abridged Version Concentrating on the "Rotten Meat" Allegory

Persons of the Dialogue:

Scholtz:)

Schmidt: ) Active Audience of the Dialogue.

Muggsey:)

Tough Tony: Narrator of the Dialogue.

Pete: Audience of the Narration.

Crazy John

Scene: Top Security Section, Some State Penitentiary.

Place: Some State.

Pete: Youse was der' when dey gave Crazy John da chair, wasn't youse?

Tough Tony: Yeah, me an' Crazy an' da rest a' da boys was all up da river, all of us in da same cell block, waitin' to get fried.

Pete: I were up a different river, so I never got no word why da coppers couldn't cook youse 'til so long after dey sent youse up to da pen to get da chair.

Tough Tony: Well, da governor's gotta give da word 'fore da coppers kin broil anybody, an' da governor was on dat boat trip he takes every year, to Greece or someplace like dat. Da coppers hadda wait 'till he got back.

Pete: How come Crazy got it an' youse guys got away?

Tough Tony: Well, all da time da governor was gone we was plannin' da break. When da coppers finally got da word dat dey could roast us we hadda hurry but we got da break set for da night 'fore dey was plannin' ta have da big barbecue. Dat night, just after we gave da signal to da boys outside ta come inside and get us, Crazy an' dat kid Scholtz started rappin' da bars in Standard Convict Code Number T'ree, so da guards wouldn't understand, a' course, Crazy said he weren't gonna break wid us, dat he'd considered all things, an' decided he'd rather stay an' get juiced damn take it on da lam wid us. Denn some a' da udder boys started rapping', also, an' it went like dis:

Scholtz: Youse ain't really gonna stay, is youse?

Crazy John: Yes, I am.

Schmidt: But dey'll burn youse to a crisp tomorrow!

Crazy John: Yes, but they cannot burn my soul.

Muggsey: Vy iss it youse tink youse got ein soul?

Crazy John: I believe that everything has a soul. Surely everything with feet has soul, golf clubs have soul, and soul is the most Capital thing in South Korea. But I can do better than just give good examples: I can prove that everything has soul, locked up in and determined by its component atoms.

I ask you, what happens when a piece of meat lies in

the hot sun for a couple of days? It gets rotten, and smells, the rottenner the smellier! Why? Because it is breaking down into its component atoms, and as is evidenced by the odor, its soul is leaking into the air. And what happens when somebody eats that meat? They get sick, maybe die! That's because the stomach breaks the meat down into its component atoms, and the soul that was in the meat is released. Since the ancients have defined soul as "solitary," the natural state of man is when he has only one soul. Therefore, when the soul of the meat is released, and it cannot escape from the body in the form of a burp, the man has more than one soul and is thusly unhealthy. This phenomenon is further evidenced by many people's reaction to "soul food." Muggsey, do you see any flaw in my reasoning?

Muggsey: Nein, off course not.

Schmidt: Okay, der's a such thing as a soul, but how do youse know dat der's life after kickin' da bucket?

Crazy John: Since, when you sniffed the rotten meat you were shown that the soul exists after death, I need only prove that individuality will be retained. I could merely say that since the soul is locked up and therefore shaped by the structure of the component atoms, and no two sets of atoms are the same, the soul of any object is unique. However, I can demonstrate a still clearer proof by further utilizing the rotten meat idea. Surely all of you have perceived the difference between the smell of rotten beef and the odor of rotten pork. To carry the matter farther you have doubtless observed how dogs, with their sensitive noses, can trail a man through a veritable maze of smells, identifying him from among many other men simply because the soul that escapes out through his pores as he perspires is different from any other soul. Every soul is an individual thing; therefore, it is quite apparent that life is continuous, beyond death. Do you agree, Schmidt?

Schmidt: Yeah.

Scholtz: Okay, der's life after getting bumped off, but how do youse know youse'll be happier denn.

Crazy John: You've admitted that individuality is retained after death. Therefore I conclude that I will still be a kleptomaniac. Now, what inconveniences does an escaped-convict thief have to face? He must always be on the look-out, always hiding, always he is in danger of being caught and

being sent back to prison, the world's most boring establishment. But what prison could hold a soul unhaltered by a physical body? None!! The medium inevitable after death is ideal to the true klepto. No, I'll die. If I went out with you, I might end up in a cement overcoat someday, unable to decompose. Do you understand, Scholtz?

Scholtz: Yeah, it's poifectly clear, Crazy.

Tough Tony: At dat point Scholtz took a slug in da arm from da coppers shootin' at da boys from outside who had come in ta get us out. We decided ta split. Crazy was poifectly calm, giggling in da corner. We got da word later dat he never turned yella when dey took him ta the chair.

Pete: Jeez, he sure was crazy!

Year after year, the assignment which consistently results in the very best writing of any assignment I have ever given is the original satire. After reading Tartuffe, the Rape of the Lock, about half of Gulliver's Travels, and all the Candide, the class explores the techniques used by those writers of classic satires. In addition we listen to recordings of modern satirists: musical comedy lyrics, skits by Bill Cosby and Nichols and May. Then students are asked to write their satires. They can satirize anything they wish, and they can use whatever format accomplishes their purposes.

Satire is, of course a tone of voice, a turn of mind, which some students cannot truly achieve, but even those students usually have fun trying. On the other hand, surprisingly large numbers of students find the satirical mode very congenial. They discover voices and techniques through which to air their grievances, their annoyances, trivial or profound, serious or silly.

Those who were especially clever found outlet for their wit: A wonderful, ragged, self-illustrated volume of maddeningly cryptic little modern poems called Words in Heat. The angry could vent appropriately: A widely irreverant attack on the school detention system called All Quiet on the West Cafeteria. Sometimes even the turned-off discover that satire gave them a means of academic sabotage: A smashing and hilarious parody of Phaedra.

All of these writing assignments are solidly based upon rhetorical problems, upon constraints which audience, purpose, and occasion place upon writing tasks. The assignments also require students to exercise their rhetorical skills as critical probes for reading the literature they are studying. In fact and indeed these assignments encourage, stimulate, and demand thinking as an essential part of the writing process.

