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# The Life of a Composition Class

JOHN ASHMEAD

FOR TWO WEEKS I once tried to record what happens in the composition classroom by using the method of Boswell with Johnson. I noted down as many remarks as I could and at the end I read back their verbal remarks to make sure the students had said what I thought they had; there were no significant changes. The class discussion, combined with what was written in quizzes and essays, provided a record as full of emotion and dramatic change as a Broadway play.

Here I present a summary, based on that full Boswellian record, of two weeks in a freshman composition course.

In this period a small group of students (designated by the signalling alphabet: Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Sugar, X-Ray, Yoke, Zebra) offered a cross section of changing reactions. The remainder of the 22 students in the section (designated First Student, Second Student and so on), changed later on, but an analysis of their subsequent roles would require a book.

The reading for the two week period was Joyce's *Dubliners*.

The first question was from Dog, a C or D student whose only interest in life, so far as the Instructor knew at the time, was driving an automobile.

His question was apparently trivial: "Who are the sisters in the first story?" The Instructor discovered by repeated

questioning that Dog's pretended ignorance (for he knew who the sisters were) was his way of informing the class and the Instructor that the stories were too difficult, too depressing.

Dog did not have his day, however, and in the end he admitted that the plots of the stories in *Dubliners* were by no means difficult.

The next question, apparently unrelated, but emotionally similar, was from Able, an amiable B student with a rather superficial, Pollyanna approach to life. Able, as he informed the Instructor after his first, shockingly low grade, had done quite well in high school. And Able wanted to know if "we are supposed to dig out symbolism in these stories?" Able said that to him the word "moral" meant "where the writer tries to put an idea across." Able explained that he had just finished reading Schopenhauer in his philosophy class, and he said of the stories of Joyce, and of Schopenhauer's writings as well: "It's all on the sad, morbid side. It's like a nightmare."

The Instructor then turned to Yoke, a football player who had somehow managed to reach college with little or no work in literature (the football team won no games that season). Yoke argued that "The stories have a philosophy according to which life is painful."

Now X-Ray spoke up against Yoke. He said: "Life as a whole is not painful in these stories, just the incidents are painful." As nearly as the Instructor could tell, at this point X-Ray was the only one of his 22 students who would say a word in defense of *Dubliners*. Yet in

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two weeks this point of view of X-Ray came to be accepted by many in the class.

Before the discussion could go on, Able argued that "Joyce is an experimenter and plays games with words."

Able in fact thought that Joyce could not really believe what he was writing. Most of the members of the class would not accept this extreme thesis, and the class then returned to the argument between X-Ray and Yoke. Gradually X-Ray took on a wide range of opponents. There were shouts, pounding on the table, cries of disbelief. X-Ray held out manfully against the idea that these stories of Joyce were pessimistic *and therefore poor*.

One of X-Ray's leading opponents was Zebra, who frequently interrupted the discussion to ask belligerently just what the Instructor thought. The Instructor referred Zebra to X-Ray. The reason for Zebra's curious appeals to the Instructor did not become clear until later.

In the course of the argument between X-Ray and Zebra a side issue was developed by a student I have chosen to call Baker, because that particular signal in the Navy means that a ship is handling explosives. Baker had told the Instructor in the previous week that he did not like literature and never read it if he could help it.

The Instructor had then suggested a remedial reading test. Baker had gleefully returned to report the highest reading speed in the Freshman Class. Baker now said, in a critical tone, that the incidents in *Dubliners* showed "a philosophy of criticism of people." Baker objected further that Joyce showed people as cowards.

Here Second Student objected that Eveline does exhibit cowardice, "but also deep feeling and emotion." After this class, Baker, though he still did not care for the stories, asked permission to

write a long paper in defense of his position.

The class shifted attention to the specific question of whether Eveline should stay dutifully at home with her rather sodden father, or go off with her lover to Buenos Aires. This discussion appealed to Charlie, a dapper, irresponsible fellow with an active social life. In the previous week Charlie had boasted to his small tutorial group (consisting of three students and the instructor) of his plans for using the college cooperative work day, not for shared voluntary labor, but as an opportunity for an even longer weekend than usual, and the members of his tutorial had laughed appreciatively. But when Third Student said: "It would have been better for Eveline to go to Buenos Aires," Charlie objected. "No, she should have stayed at home and faced her responsibilities."

The Instructor asked in some surprise whether this was the standard Charlie would apply to his own life?

Charlie was now on the spot. His three man tutorial had appreciated his easy-going evasion of the college voluntary labor day. But the larger, more public group of 22 students was something else again. He now said: "You need to evade responsibilities once in a while or you will become dull." The class, all of whom except Charlie had worked hard for the College for a whole day did not receive this remark in a very friendly way. After a dead pause, which seemed to disconcert Charlie, Able, wearing his rose-tinted glasses, then said that when Eveline stays at home "she has a happy ending. It was the best thing for her."

Five men wanted to argue against Able, an unsettling business for him, since he placed a high value on the approval of his fellows, but the end of the hour had come.

The Wednesday class meeting began with a short written quiz on the philos-

ophy underlying "The Boarding House," the story in which Polly and her mother trap seducer Doran into marriage.

The Instructor read from X-Ray's quiz: "Joyce just tells us, in his expert way of creating moods, that people are bound to be sad, and have sad experiences sometimes in their lives, and it is good to look at these experiences objectively instead of being overwhelmed by them." X-Ray then said that he thought Joyce was just being realistic. The Instructor asked if X-Ray was willing to approve of realism.

Now Dog blurted out "Everything depends on the way the story's written. A story can be heartening even if it ends badly." Here he turned timidly to the rest of the class as if he expected them to be against him.

And Dog, instead of writing a conventional story about a racing driver, daringly tried his hand at providing a new ending for "The Boarding House."

On Thursday and Friday the class met in groups of three or four students (which we call tutorials), and as is the usual practice one student in each tutorial read his paper out loud to the others, who were responsible for criticizing it.

In the second tutorial Seventh Student read a short story about a hitchhiker who, on being denied a lift by a salesman, had a spasm of rage, which he expressed in cursing, and in whittling a stick; his hitchhiker here (obviously Seventh Student himself) finally managed to achieve a calm acceptance of the situation. Here the Instructor suggested that the whittling of the stick was an unconscious but effective expression of a feeling of hostility against the salesman. In the course of the discussion in tutorial Seventh Student revealed that he was a conscientious objector and that he was completely unwilling to admit that he could have any such dubious hostile instincts.

In another tutorial Ninth Student wrote a rather naive story about a boy and a girl who promised to be true to each other for a summer. After a period of separation the boy returned to find he had been jilted by the girl.

At first all four men in this tutorial saw the boy as being in the right, but by the end of the tutorial they had come to the conclusion that the boy was as ridden by vanity as the hero of "Araby."

The remaining papers involved usually some criticism of living completely in a dream, or inner world, and some greater willingness to accept reality, however pessimistic it might seem.

Able, however, had read Joyce at a very superficial level, and he wrote of "Counterparts" (the story in which a man revenges himself for a hard day at the office by beating his son): "Everyone has had days when everything seems to be going wrong. A good night's sleep often cures this condition." Charlie, the class playboy, who had gone jauntily off for the weekend, leaving the rest of the class (and the college) cleaning up the campus, had clearly been disturbed by the class reaction against him, and the Instructor found that Charlie had written: "If you've ever thought of dropping everything and starting fresh at some other more exciting task, you must have become conscious of the ties, duties, and obligations that fetter most people and keep free will at a minimum."

The papers of this first week showed that four men now had a good understanding of the stories—Dog, who had been so hostile at first, Second Student, Fourth Student, and X-Ray. In his paper X-Ray wrote: "Joyce constantly has the reader in the mood of the story." As it happened, none of these students was in the same small tutorial group. Of the seven tutorial groups, now four had at least one defender of one story by Joyce.

At the Monday class meeting a dis-

cussion started on "The Boarding House," the story in which Polly and her mother force seducer Doran to marry Polly.

Charlie, fresh from his long weekend, said cheerily that Doran was "terrified, but not panic stricken, but annoyed." On being pressed to explain, he finally said that Doran was afraid of Polly's brother, worried about his job, and that Doran had a feeling of sin. Able now volunteered the idea that in such a situation the man was morally responsible only when caught. The class did not care for this observation.

The Instructor asked the class if there were any absolute standards they would apply in such circumstances. Did they believe in absolute ethical commandments, such as the Sermon on the Mount, or did they prefer more relative, psychological standards? Here Tenth Student suggested a comparison with the story "A Painful Case," in which Mr. Duffy rejects the advances of Mrs. Sinico because of his elevated, if uncompassionate moral code. Seventh Student said that Duffy broke off the affair with Mrs. Sinico because he believed in the Sermon on the Mount.

X-Ray replied: "You can't pin a Phari-see like Duffy down but he does things which are sometimes worse than the acts of a criminal."

At the Wednesday class meeting the Instructor asked for a written statement by each student on the story he had liked best and the reasons for his preference. X-Ray easily found a story that he could identify with, while Charlie remained contemptuous of them all. But Dog wrote of "Eveline": "I was emotionally moved more in this story than in any other." Dog had earlier in the week volunteered the information that he was facing a similar choice, in that he had to decide whether to continue in his father's business (which, so he thought, offered only a dull security) or whether he should strike out on his own.

Zebra wrote of "Counterparts" that it was "a good sketch of a man afraid to come to grips with himself." Yoke, perhaps thinking wistfully of his football, praised "The Dead" because there was "no plot to search for as in the others," but Able preferred "The Dead" because "I could imagine and feel myself in every incident of the party." No longer was there the monolithic hostility of the first class.

Baker said that the readers had preferred the stories closest to their own experience, but in spite of Tenth Student's remark that the seduction of Polly was "a practical everyday occurrence," this conclusion was rejected. X-Ray suggested: "We're close to all the stories because we're human."

Zebra, clearly not satisfied with the turn the class was taking, interrupted to say that "most of us try to figure out what we're expected to say—it might be too ingenious—we read things in that are not there. There are too many controls on what we say."

The Instructor replied: "You can hold any critical position if you can back it up with evidence."

Zebra countered: "Yes, but your evidence is partial."

With these words the class seemingly plunged back where it had started. And Able's subsequent remarks criticized the process of digging out meaning (especially the teacher's meanings) in the stories.

But in fact the general reaction of the class to Zebra's remarks was not favorable. And as nearly as the Instructor could tell, Zebra was now almost alone in his complete dislike for all the stories.

On Friday Zebra and X-Ray had a chance to go more deeply into their disagreement over the merits of *Dubliners* because they were in the same small tutorial. X-Ray read his paper praising Joyce's use of the dream world of the characters as a principal feature of the

stories. Thirteenth Student (whose own paper—not read in tutorial—attacked directly those who had criticized the stories as being pessimistic and who concluded that “‘A Painful Case’ enables you to reevaluate your own life”) sided with X-Ray against Zebra. In the course of an excited argument which included at least one suggestion to Zebra to lower his voice, Zebra finally said: “I don’t care for giving examples. I never try to do that.”

Zebra admitted that he too was a dreamer but said he saw nothing wrong in it. He didn’t want to say that the stories were insane, but he really thought they were; the characters were psychopaths. Zebra admitted that people could have some dreams, “Richard the Lion Hearted Dreams, in which you save people about to jump off buildings.”

X-Ray argued that dreams shouldn’t affect you as much as they do the characters in these stories, but that there was nothing wrong in Joyce’s telling you about them. Zebra replied that the quest for reality, as opposed to the Sunday School type of book, had been overplayed. (He volunteered the information after class that he taught Sunday School). We should, according to Zebra, go back to the Sunday School type of book. “After all,” he added, “Joyce only wrote these stories to make money.”

Finally Zebra said: “I still have inhibitions about expressing myself on these stories. I feel I’m trying to say what teacher wants. I realize that isn’t what you want.”

Able in his tutorial (the fifth) delivered a series of platitudes on how well we know our friends, in an essay which treated only the most superficial kind of friendship. Second Student argued: “You don’t really know your closest friends.” And, with help from Twelfth Student, proved it.

Among Able’s remarks were, as he received the full criticism of his tutorial

mates, “I see where I’m tying myself up”—“I see the folly of saying it”—“I’ll admit they are shallower interpretations.”

Dog in his tutorial at first said that he had provided a new ending for “Eveline” because he had to write something, then ended up by admitting that the story had moved him deeply, as indeed it should have since his story was about the emotional barriers against breaking away from home, so clearly a problem in his own life. Fifth Student also read in this tutorial and began to criticize as he read, saying at one point: “I always see it when I read it in tutorial. I don’t know why I don’t see it before.”

Charlie, the playboy, was absent. When his paper came in, it provided a new ending for “A Mother,” Charlie’s favorite story, in which Kathleen revolts against her mother and discovers, so Charlie wrote: “that it is sometimes right to defy and disobey your parents when you become mature enough to make up your own mind on a point where you think your parents are wrong.”

This was a different statement from his early remarks about the need to evade responsibilities in order to avoid becoming dull. Perhaps it was a shade more responsible.

Before going on to the next two week unit of the course, the Instructor at the Monday meeting of the class read without comment the last few pages of Joyce’s “The Dead,” that magnificent statement of human charity and compassion. Then Baker, who had still not turned in his essay, said: “A pessimist thinks life itself is evil. But Joyce shows us respect for the integrity of human beings.”

This statement was fully accepted by the class. Both Baker and the class had come a long way from believing that the stories showed merely a philosophy of pessimism.

In his composition Baker later concluded: “When I read *Dubliners* there

was a sort of catharsis: I didn't want to become more like these people, but less like them. I had a new respect for the integrity of man. I wanted to help him, to share myself with him. For this reason I think that Joyce preaches humanism, the doctrine of personal integrity, not pessimism, and that is the purpose of the book."

And in his next tutorial Baker said: "I never did read much fiction. Finally I can read fiction with interest. I see the

issues that pertain to life in it and I see how valuable they are."

Baker had lived up to his explosive name.

Perhaps we would all agree that, of the different kinds of teaching, composition teaching is among the most demanding. And perhaps these records may suggest that it is also among the most rewarding. Certainly no other kind of teaching is more dramatic.

### DESCRIPTION, WITH CATEGORIES

Then we lumped around for a while, went around this little fairish thing and got some popcorn, and went over to the bay, where the fireworks were to be.

They had three places set up that all gave off ground noise ones. One had two displays, yet. This one shot them up. All ones that went up were one of these:

1. go right up and go *bang!*
  2. go up, divide into orange octopus, each tentacle go *bang!*
  3. go up and come down leaving a shower of sparks, no bang.
  4. go up, burst out, go *bang!* a coupla times.
  5. go up, break out, break out, break out, go bang, lotsa sparks.
  6. go up: sparks come down with whirly soun'.
- They were pretty crappy fireworks.

—Letter to my sister, by Rita Ann Shuster  
Route 1, Box 236, Seneca Falls, New York.