HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH: THE SWORD SLEEPING IN OUR HAND

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There must be a hundred reasons to read wonderful literature in high school: I've heard several of them discussed here, this weekend. What I would like to do this afternoon is talk to you about one--only one--very small reason for teaching literature in high school. It is a reason for teaching literature for its own sake, and never as a method of learning about writing.

It is for this one and very particular reason that I chose for my title "High School English: The Sword Sleeping in our Hand." As I know you all know, it is taken from Blake's stanza from "Milton" which runs

> I will not cease from mental fight,
> Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
> Till we have built Jerusalem
> In England's green and pleasant land

I have always loved that poem and been on the lookout for a place where I could recite it. There are not a great many occasions on which anyone wants to hear someone <u>else</u> recite poetry though people like to do it themselves. I had been looking around for years before I finally lit on the perfect group. I was living in England and someone said, "Oh would you come speak to our group?" I thought, "This is the perfect place. I will pull out the Blake. He's one of <u>theirs</u>--they'll eat it up." So I stood in front of the group. They were wonderfully responsive. The English, at least

in that town, have the gift of looking, as they settle to listen to speakers, as if they do nothing but gather at the Guild Hall to listen to speakers. You feel you belong right in the skein where you are--very comforting. And so with a lot of éclat I started out, "I will not cease from mental fight," and went on: "Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand" and all those hospitable faces in front of me were turning into codfish--which is another national gift. I don't know if you have ever seen what English men and -women tend to look like when it has got to be about four in the afternoon, and you are touring somewhere, and they can't find a place to have tea--but in any event, that is the expression I was seeing before me. It was something like very mild withdrawal symptoms. By the time I got through with Jerusalem and England's green and pleasant land it was worse. Afterwards I asked them, "What was wrong with the Blake?" They told me: "Well you see, we have a thing called the Women's Institute, something parallel to your American Federation of Women's Clubs perhaps, and it sings as its anthem at every single meeting the poem you were reciting. And we had rather hoped, as it were, that you'd bring something fresh from across the Atlantic." Later I learned that for 200 years the English have hoped we'd bring something fresh from across the Atlantic, and I've learnt not to be alarmed by it. In any case, it wasn't a successful recital of the Blake lines. They've been waiting in my head for ten years since then--so today I had my chance and recited them to you.

The sword that we have in our hand, if we are high school English teachers, is the last chance of most young Americans to hear any kind of moral inquiry provided with examples. If our students are reading "Flowers for Algernon" or "Lord Jim" it is likely their last chance to think specifically about what a disaster for the heart technology can be (as in "Flowers for Algernon") and how very hard it is to be brave on the spot ("Lord Jim).

By now we know the churches will not provide Americans with moral fervor or even moral information. Even when a priest or minister does give moral information, he or she very seldom offers specific examples to show how it applies. Literature is the greatest hodgepodge of telling examples, and it is getting to be the only source of examples. A human being seems to wake up to his or her moral nature when hearing theory and examples at the same time. The best psychological writing supplies this. For example, in the United States a study was made of nearly 100 men and how they adapted to life over the 30 years following their Harvard graduation. The author, George Vaillant (Adaptation to Life, Little, Brown & Co.) offered a theory of various ways people adapt, and then supplied example after example of how these men did it. It makes marvelous reading. But most Americans never see excellent writing in the field of psychology. Most Americans go to churches so supine there is no moral energy for the risk of just plain curiosity about life you need in order to imagine examples. The last time most

Americans hear anything even slightly intense and unstinting, in the way of morality, is in their senior English high school English class.

We need examples, examples, examples because we need to have this conversation with ourselves: "O yes! That, of course, was the right thing for the man to do in that case: what is the right thing for me to do in my case?" "What should I do? I am not saying I will do the right thing, but I'd like to determine what it is, anyway!" We are probably rather more ethically developed than the Englishmen Blake knew in his time, but we have an abiding and horrible character fault: we don't know when to jump in on the spot. We don't jump at the right moment! Let me give an example.

Throughout the nineteenth century there were English and Welsh children working over a dozen hours a day, deep in coal mines, standing barefoot in ankle-deep coal-water, pushing cars back and forth to the mining face. Some people thought this was appalling, and a great many people did not care at all. Men sat in London clubs who when they saw a pauper pressing his nose against the diningroom windowglass would call the Secretary to have someone get that guttersnipe away. This was the sort of thing that Dickens hated so much. Now we are better. We really no longer have an unwritten understanding that those in desperate need must hide their misery in order to preserve the moral comfort of the rich. No one thinks it the thing, any more, that some should be in misery and others

not. When there is a question of an ethic toward one or another segment of society now, we give it a lot of attention. In this sense, we are better than Blake's contemporaries.

If you recall, however, a few years ago, a woman was leisurely knifed to death by someone in a New York City suburb. It took the man 22 minutes to kill her. Thirty-five people watched from their windows. Not one of the thirty-five called the police. In the inquiry, the onlookers were interviewed by a psychology student; a movie was made, and many people tried to think through what makes people passive--unable to jump at the right moment. A Dickens' villian would have exclaimed, "If that sort of revolting person is going to knife somebody, he's got to do it somewhere else where it doesn't offend perfectly respectable Englishmen who are minding their own business looking out their windows for which they pay rent." We have really got well past that point, morally. Our moral failing is not in consciousness but in not jumping at the right moment.

High school English helps make people jump at the right moment because it shows us the rest of our species who have the same problem, who have the same horrible feeling of being dazed, instead of wakened, by some sudden occasion. Do you remember how Jim, in Conrad's story, had a brilliant career ahead of him? He was to be one of England's bright-eyed, fair-haired boys, with blue eyes and a frank expression--all those things that go a long way in English

career-making. He was learning mercantile shipping. He was thinking, Conrad tells us, about his career, of how he was going to be brave and good and have integrity, and be First Mate or First Officer, whichever it is, of his ship. Everything would go well for him. Just then, a wind blew up in the harbour where his ship was anchored. The wind blew a smaller ship nearby right into another ship. The midshipmen on Jim's ship all ran to their rail to jump into their cutter to row over and help get people out of the water. For some reason, Jim, the hero of this story, didn't get there in time because he went into a daze. As he was thinking about his brilliant future, the other young men were tumbling into their boat; then he felt a hand on his shoulder and an older officer spoke to him, saying: "That's all right, boy--you were too slow this time--next time you'll get there!" Jim didn't even acknowledge he had missed the moment. As he watched the other midshipmen doing what the moment required, meeting the moral crisis, without any passivity, he nearly sneered at the Master. He said to himself, "This whole thing is rather hysterical--very exaggerated"--so what we have here is Jim denying a kind of reality in order to protect his own weakness. We have, thanks to Conrad's telling, a perfect example of the kind of adaptation which psychologists like Vaillant call "Denial."

The next occasion for Jim was when he was an officer on a ship that had 800 pilgrims, Conrad tells us, in her hold. I don't know if you have ever been belowdecks in a very large, very old ship with

the iron flaking off; one of the first things you do if you've been in such a ship (I have) is wonder how many compartments there are and how water tight they are. In Lord Jim, the ship went over something; Jim went down to see and found that the forward part of the ship was filling with water. He saw that her single bulkhead was rotten. The only image he could keep in his mind was: the hull is rotten--the rest of the crew of Europeans were all getting out and getting into the boats saying "It's hopeless, you can't let those 800 pilgrims up!"--all Asiatics dressed in white, you know, meditation types--don't let them up because if they once get up they'll swamp the boats and there is not enough space anyway. It's hopeless --can't you see it's hopeless? She is going down and can't hold! That boat is completely rotten! Jim did not put any other scene in front of his mind. He went into a daze, and he found himself in the life-boat with the others. They rowed to shore. The next thing there is an inquiry because the ship didn't go down. She washed ashore, without her crew, with her hold full of those pilgrims. Once again Jim hadn't risen to the crisis. If we use our 20th century language instead of Conrad's 19th century language we can paraphrase him this way: There is something soft in Jim; he didn't make it; he didn't make the scene is some way. There is some slowness; funny he didn't look rotten! He looked so gorgeous! Conrad is telling us about a phenomenon we call those kids with their passivity.

It is either those kids with their passivity or it is all those thirty-five New York suburbanites with their passivity or it's our passivity if, for example, we allow spent plutonium rods to be stored up in Minnesota or whatever we allow to happen that must not. Perhaps, in the 1950's or 60's, when the underground bomb testing was going on in Utah and all the protesters told the Utah people "Don't let them do it to you, it's going to pile up, you are going to have a pile up of radioactivity there." People in Utah thought, "Well, I don't know, you seem kind of hysterical somehow." I remember a few of those conversations. They said, "You people are always hysterical about something. What are you going to be hysterical about when you are through being hysterical about radioactivity?" Or that sort of thing.

We have some forces working against us that bring moral trance into American life and we have a very strong instrument to remove the trance from American life and to get people to move very fast on the spot. That force, I think, is Senior High School English. First, the forces that cause trance, as you know, are gigantic. The biggest one has been pointed out intelligently by at least three people today. Television watching breeds inaction. That muscle in the mind that makes us able to imagine scenes doesn't get exercise enough if someone is watching 6¼ hours a day of television (the American average). One fourth grade teacher told me a few months ago that she had trouble keeping the children's

attention when she was telling them about the nanny goat and her seven kids. You remember, the wolf comes. He has made the baker whiten his paws with flour. He has his voice chalked up by somebody so his voice is gentle. He comes to the door of the goats' house after the mother's gone. "That's me it's all right! I'm your mother come back, it's all right, open up!" The kids open up and the wolf races in and eats them all but the one that hides in the clock. The fourth grade teacher found her pupils wandering off, not listening. Afterwards she said, "What happened?" and they said, "well, I didn't get it." She explained, "well, the wolf dressed up" and she acted out the whole story for them again, but they said: "Ya, but I don't get it." Finally the teacher saw that what they were not getting was this: they could not make the scene before their minds' eyes. It wasn't that they didn't intellectually follow the plot; they didn't grasp the drama of the thing. She felt very concerned about that.

Another example of the imagination's agility (which was missing in those children) is a story about Jung and Freud. Jung did a group of experiments in his laboratory when he was a young student of psychiatry. He came up with some findings that supported previous findings of Sigmund Freud. Freud was the older man, but at that time he wasn't well thought of in Vienna. It was the stylish thing around the hallways of the hospitals to make fun of Freud and say, "Oh, that guy is come up with all this new fangle stuff!" But now

Jung found his lab results supported Freud's contentions. So Jung looked ahead with that facility that we have to make a scene in the mind's eye and asked himself, "What will happen to my career if I support this man? If I say my findings support Sigmund Freud I will be laughed at the way he is and they'll say, 'support that guy? you are out of your mind!' or some line of thought." Jung looked ahead and saw that scene. He had the imaginative ability to make that scene, but he also had the agility deliberately to erase that scene so he said to himself, "All right, that might well come to be. I see that scene ahead--just like World War III, I see it; it's there--I won't deny it, but if imagining it makes me so fearful that I do something corrupt, I am going to lock that scene off." Jung did lock the scene out of his mind. He didn't look at it. This is the reverse kind of imaginative power. I will not look at that scene, we learn to say: I'll do what's right, right now, and the devil take the hindmost. Right then, Jung wrote the paper and plainly said, this supports the findings of Dr. Freud.

Everything Jung thought was going to result from it did result. For two years, Jung's work was looked down on. He was laughed at; he was a supporter of Freud's, and his career which had been looking very bright and safe in the establishment was dimmed. People stopped thinking well of him for two or three years. He did pay a price for that agility which enabled him to have integrity. All that happened because he was able to stop envisioning. So, we have two

ideas: if you could bring to your mind a scene then you can be brave; in Lord Jim, if Jim had brought to his mind a scene he would have been brave and if you can remove from your mind a scene then, also, you can be brave. TV does not teach that agility of imagination.

There is another big force I would like to discuss at this point which causes people to go into a trance of inaction. That is hopelessness. If you think that everything is going rotten or that the rottenness has no limit to it, for example, then you become hopeless and it is very tough to do the moral thing at a given moment. The crookedness of our culture is so limitless we often feel hopeless. Every instance of integrity is tiny and invisible in the general smoke of chiseling and rationalization. Literature helps tremendously in that any work of it--a story, for instance, sets apart and contains safely a vessel of time. Once upon a time, we are told; not over and over--just once. Just once means a single, pure instance, uncontaminated by future considerations, as when Jung cut off the future image he had, just once, just for one moment not letting himself think ahead. Now there is a moral secret to this making you think a thing happens just once. It is done by literature. Some is done by reading aloud before the children ever get to school. If offers a kind of psychic skill called "getting things into a laboratory condition." When we teach our children science they learn to ask for a lab condition. They learn to isolate a question, to ask if all other factors are equal, so they can look

straight at the issues. Circumspection has no place in science or ethics. That's why it is such a great thing if children in school and before school learn to say, "Once upon a time there was a king and a queen and they had seven sons and six of them disappeared. The seventh son was sent to go out to see if he could find them to bring them back." The secret of this is not the wild story about the king and the queen--those are typical things that psychologists understand--what is interesting to me is that when you say it happened <u>just once</u>, right away a child has a sense of playfulness. This doesn't happen forever; this isn't that endless, slopping continuity of Sesame Street, with that endless talk back and forth between people and puppets always breaking the drama. "Once upon a time" is like the genii and the bottle. It is a particular situation. It is all right to give my attention to it although it is all in play. There is a relationship between play and integrity implicit in the Jung example. When Jung said, "If I support this Sigmund Freud my career will be hurt" his thought was practical, not playful. But then he followed it further and said, "I realize that you can't live your life on a lie and so I didn't do it, I did the right thing." The fact is, however, that you <u>can</u> live your life on a lie; thousands of Americans are living their lives on lies. A scholar has recently written a book studying our lying culture; you know what it is. You've seen it in school. The level of cheating is high; the level of cheating at the United States Air Force

Academy is high; the level of cheating in the Congress is high. So people <u>do</u> live their lives on lies. We tell lies to forward our careers. Jung was mistaken: you can lie and survive very well.

Jung meant it is not fair play to lie. Play! The sense of fun comes from play, from imaginative play. It's something that a child learns to do in reading literature. We have wonderful text books for young people. I read 16 of them before I came here today: I read texts for 14 year olds, 15 and 16 year olds and I was astounded by the lovely literature in them, simply laid down before our teenagers. I got involved in a wonderful story called "Flowers for Algernon." I read it, and wept; then I got to some questions at the end, and I thought, "Oh, my God, I can't answer those!" I was terrified. Then I thought, "Why do we have these questions at the end?" and then I thought what a wonderful thing if we could just read the story and not have the questions at the end, if we could just read the story and then hear the story aloud. Might we just have someone read the story aloud? That would be wonderful to give our attention to the horrendous thing that was happening to the retarded child in the story. The questions had to do with author's methods, how is it for shadow? where do we see conflict? what forces of symbolization were used here? and so on. Those questions are very interesting to writers, but I don't think those are the right questions to be asking readers. We want to fall into the content of literature and get lost in it the way we did during our early teen years when we first read

novels. I think we should do that in a text book, too. We should fall into the literature and then hear it read or told aloud, so that the story isn't belittled by method. When you read literature, you feel that a given story is the greatest thing happening at that given moment; its necessities and occasion become your own. Then the academic questions at the end drive you back into American technology again, how? how? how? Let's see how did the author do it? what is the method here? It is awful to have to leave a story to ask oneself about techniques. Who cares?

Most Americans will never attend a Spring Hill Conference, most Americans are not going to get to talk about ideas very much after they are 18. They are going to be told <u>how</u> to do finite tasks the rest of their lives. There is a despair in that. Inside ourselves we do not love methodology, we are not in love with technical means. I suggest that we read high school literature out loud, encourage young people to read aloud to themselves and then tell the stories by memory. I suggest they get the stories by memory and tell abbreviated forms of them in the high school classes if that is possible. Let us never bring literary <u>method</u> ever again into high school level English courses. No one becomes a good writer at the age of 18 anyway; no one needs literary method. A second point is that if young people are writing things themselves (and nearly everybody at 17 or 18 does) then they particularly don't need the method; they need to fall into themselves to find themselves and to find others; they

need to wander through the fantastic loves and injustices in those stories, to wander through all those fantastic feelings. I think we cut some of their hopelessness if we allow young people to fall into literature. They find this place for conversations with the soul. In most families for example, you don't get people sitting around the dinner table saying, "You know, Macbeth was really very much the West Point type. He never really was sorry, he just didn't want to be caught." This is an idea that Mary McCarthy had years ago; I thought it an awfully good one. Macbeth was simply sorry he got caught. And of course, he was married to the perfect Spring Hop type for a West Pointer. She was the perfect wife; she got him where she wanted him to go, you know, the 1950's executive wife type, Lady Macbeth, a little ruthless but still! Most families don't have those conversations, so young people are not going to have the conversations that are easy and ethical and passionate and objective unless they have them right in English class. An awful lot falls on English teachers. So let us have the class conversations squarely about the stories themselves, <u>NEVER</u> about the authors' methods. For example, say half of the family stayed home Sunday which always happens in our family, because half my family is always furious at the church and the other half are going. The half that go whether I am in that half or not always come back and are holier than thou to the half that stayed home. The half that stayed home are very assertive and sound smarter because they are confident there is no

God. They heckle the returning churchgoers. They say, "How was church?" "I don't know, it was fine--they had Communion." "Well, how was Communion?" Now, no one answers and says, "The Vicar brought us the Communion by offering it 18 inches off the rail and then 3 inches over so we were able more efficiently to get it into our mouths. He was followed by the Chalice bearer who offered the cup at 14 inches above the rail so no one spilled. Other arriving communicates came up the right hand side of the nave and we returned by the left side, so there was no interference, so actually Communion worked out very well." I don't think we ought to describe methods in church or in English literature. Who cares?

Anything that gets into the memory seems holy to us. If we could teach children to memorize stories, I think that would increase the amount of holiness in their lives. We already know that anything that gets into the memory feels holy; it is some tie between memory and numinous life. The more we can get into the memory the better. The more we have the sense of telling our own story the better. If the child tells the story of Charlie and Algernon aloud or tells the story of Jim in Lord Jim aloud, those whole problems--heartlessness and cowardess--become the child's own property. He hears his own voice saying it; it is not Conrad anymore; it's something to do with all of us.

I should like to suggest a wild idea: and that is that our 18 year olds leave school able to tell by memory 100 stories--from the

Goat and the Seven Kids to Lord Jim. Whether the stories included "Flowers for Algernon" or "The Rocking Horse Winner" or whatever was chosen, these young people would have 100 visible scenes in the mind's eye. They'd have 100 sets of characters acting in strange ways in the memory. Whatever the griefs or temptations oppressing them in later years, they would remember all this holiness inside them. Whatever the pressures are on the outside there would always be that reality inside--those 100 instances of the "things invisible" as they call it in church. That could be a gift of the English departments of the high schools.

When we complain about young people being passive and not standing forward at the right moment, we have to ask if they know of any examples of moral occasion. The 100 memorized stories may be, oddly enough, a kind of heroic sword we can put into their hands. They may grow up to be cruel, like the scientists in "Flowers for Algernon" but they will not be unaware of cruelty and they will not love it. They may grow up to miss every occasion for altruism and bravery, as Jim did twice, but they will not be unconscious of cowardice. If we give our students 100 cases of literature, memorized, their moral imaginations surely will be roused. They will be restless and fervent, like sentries who like nature--liking the pacing about under the boughs on a starry night, yet keeping a look out for what wants guarding or at least a lantern held to it.