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SECOND-QUARTER FRESHMAN COMPOSITION AND THE AMERICAN DECADES: FROM THE ROARING TWENTIES TO THE DISENCHANGED SIXTIES

by Robert L. Coard

When I was reassigned to a second-quarter freshman composition course at St. Cloud State in the fall of 1972 after some years of teaching only literature courses, I was given the privilege, extended to all teachers, of organizing the course around subject matter of my own choosing. Since I teach American literature, I naturally planned composition in that field, but I groped for some format that would yield more appeal than that of isolated materpieces. I also wanted material affording considerable choice for a long research paper, a basic requirement of the course. Finally, I sought material that would permit easy change to avoid the bane of plagiarism attendant upon repetition in a research-paper course. Over the years I have been glad hat I hit upon the American decades as an organizational principle. Since 1972, I have taught the course four times based on the American 1920s, three times based on the 1930s, twice on the 1940s, and twice on the 1950s. Because much of the subject matter falls within the experience of living persons, it has a definite immediacy of appeal. Perhaps the teacher himself can recall F. D. R.'s mellifluous voice coming in on the old cabinet model radio or Harry Truman giving them hell from the end car of a special campaign train. For the benefit of anyone considering

such an approach to freshman composition, let me record some strategies, exercises, projects, and materials.

Perhaps I might start by saying that a useful bibliography on the subject is available in Brooke Workman's Teaching the Decades: A Humanities Approach to American Civilization (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975). Though I set up my own decades composition courses before the publication of this book, I'd recommend it for anyone contemplating such a step. The Workman book is designed for high-school use in an American Studies course. It includes units on popular culture, architecture and painting, and dancing and music in addition to history and literature so that its lessons are not always readily transferable to a freshman composition course stressing library study, note taking, research paper forms, outlining and organizing, and composition and revision. Workman's reduction of the "decades" to three, 1920-1930, 1930-1940, and 1945-1960, seems to me less desirable than an arrangement into four comprising the 1920s, 30, 40s, and 50s. The absence of 1940-1945 Workman explains in a parenthesis: "The World War II era was excluded because its central focus is the global war,

a subject well taught in American history courses, yet one which can be reviewed in relation to the 1930s and to 1945-1960." I myself don't follow this reasoning, at least for decades composition courses, for World War II is a source of great interest for students, and Norman Mailer's novel The Naked and the Dead (1948) is a rewarding book with which to present it.

Perhaps the absence of any inexpensive and available history in paperback to cover both the war years and the peace years of the 1940s constitutes an unvoiced reason for Workman's arrangement. Frederick Lewis Allen's Only Yesterday covers the 1920s, and the same author's Since Yesterday continues the story through the 1930s. Eric Goldman's The Critical Decade and After carries the story from 1945 to 1960, but what can one do with 1940-1945? When I first tried the 1940s, I used a book of documents and cuttings by Chester E. Eisinger, author of Fiction of the Forties, called The 1940's: Profile of a Nation in Crisis. The next time round I tried to eke out the war years with almanac chronologies, the general encyclopedias, and a reserve list, filling out the peace half of the 1940s with pertinent parts of the Goldman text. When I first tried the 1920s, I used Malcolm Cowley's Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age for general background. It is a fine literary collection of the period with some perceptive expository pieces and excellent suggestions for research papers. However, I find that works like those by Allen and Goldman with their brisk connected narrative and preferable to books of documents and anthologies as introductions to a period. For all their merits, though both Allen histories and Goldman too are dated, lack adequate bibliographies, and have severe shortcomings in their treatment of such matters as women and minorities, areas much used in the preparation of research papers. For example, Allen's Only Yesterday, first published in 1931, has only one mention of "Negroes" in the index, and Since Yesterday, first published in 1940, has none. To be sure, Since Yesterday does mention the Scottsboro Case, but gives it less than a fifth of a sentence. The Goldman book is somewhat more attentive to minorities, but the years 1955 to 1960 are filled out in two scrappy chapters and an epilogue added in 1960 to the original

work of 1956 that covered the decade 1945-1955. Perhaps because of its recency, the critical Supreme Court decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the schools gets only a couple of sentences.

Another work worth consulting before organizing any decade course on the 1950s is a pamphlet The Fitful Fifties: Literature and Culture in America 1950-1960 (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) by Keith Neilson. It provides an historical overview, suggestions for term-paper topics, and a helpful bibliography and reprints some key documents and evaluations of the period.

An exercise useful early in a decades composition course and one that I have assignd more often than not is the preparation of a chronological table of important events, political, social, scientific, and literary, preferably on one sheet if typed. To that requirement I add an essay of about five hundred words in which the student defends his table. This defense gets into the philosophy of history. Should sports events, popular songs, motion pictures, and other entertainment be noticed? When should a decade begin and end? If the 1930s start with the stock market crash of 1929, should they end in 1939 with the coming of World War II in Europe or in 1941 with Pearl Harbor and the American entry? One student listed the birth dates of her parents as significant events of the 1920s, and I could hardly quarrel with that!

This chronological chart assignment often reveals artistic talent: dates may be set up in interesting three or four column categories; legal-size paper is employed now and then with fold outs to gain more space; different-colored inks occasionally enhance the artistic effect. The bibliography must include at least **four** sources in reference so that a simple copying does not occur. Warnings on the team approach are also issued. Of the different facets perhaps the library work is the most fruitful. Almanacs have an appeal of their own, and comparisons produce insights and uncover intriguing discrepancies. It's good to check the "Memorable Dates" in World Almanac and Book of Facts against "Headline History" in Information Please Almanac and both of them against more specialized works like Gorton Carruth and Associates, The Encyclopedia of American Facts and

Dates with its fourfold categories; the chronology up front in the appropriate volume of Encyclopedia Britannica's The Annals of America; the tables and charts in Webster's Guide to American History; and the literary chronologies available in C. Hugh Holman's A Handbook to Literature and James Hart, The Oxford Companion to American Literature.

Even before calling for the chronological chart and its defense, I like to try briefer written assignments. An unglamourous but basic one is the check on reading with an open-book summary of a chapter in the background history. Summarizing makes for a consideration of what are the most important ideas and what clues are useful in locating them. Another exercise sometimes assigned has been locating a suitable illustration to go with the background history which usually has no illustration in its paperback version. If a good cartoon is located in a magazine file, it can be Xeroxed and brought to class with a written argument for its inclusion, dwelling upon artistic merit, relevance to the text, and historical importance. Generally though, the student brings an illustration in a library book with the composition tucked between the covers. Fortunately, I have an office on the same floor as the classrooms so that it's no great problem to get the book stack inside. There are dangers though in this assignment. Sometimes the student checks out a volume with such striking illustrations that I thumb about and gaze when I should be grading.

In the fall of 1972, I tried to relate early composition to the Nixon-McGovern campaign by asking for a mini-research paper on a presidential election or nomination struggle of the 1920s. If I recall correctly, a large national gasoline company cooperated in creating interest by issuing campaign buttons and other mementos of past presidential campaigns. Two student research papers came in with neatly focused topics: one on the Literary Digest straw poll of 1924 (it wasn't a fiasco like the fatal poll of 1936); and one on Time Magazine's handling of the 1928 presidential campaign. The Catholic issue added an extra dimension of interest to Alfred Smith's quest for the Democratic nomination in 1924 and for the presidency as the Democratic

candidate in 1928. Since then, I have made some use of presidential campaigns for mini-research papers in decades courses: once for the election of 1948 with its appeal deriving from Truman's unexpected triumph; and once for the election of 1952, which illustrated the growing importance of television. In a course on the 1930s, the 1936 presidential election served as a topic for the main literary research paper for one or two students, since Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here (1935) had an intimate relation to the 1936 election, particularly to the campaign of the Union Party, formed by the strange alliance of William Lemke, Father Coughlin, Dr. Townsend, and Gerald L. K. Smith.

Besides the background histories by Frederick Lewis Allen and Eric Goldman, another staple item in a decades course is the Famous American Plays Series issued by Dell and covering every decade starting with the 1920s volume edited by Kenneth Macgowan and ending with the 1960s volume edited by Harold Clurman. Occasionally, the play text has been the source of the main literary research paper. A few times these have been comparison papers between genres, as in the comparison of John Steinbeck's novelette Of Mice and Men with the stage version in Famous American Plays of the 1930s edited by Harold Clurman; or the comparison of Carson McCullers's novelette The Member of the Wedding with the stage version in Famous American Plays of the 1940s edited by Henry Hewes.

More recently in the 1920s and 1930s courses I have substituted short story collections for the Dell Famous American Plays Series. Ring Lardner's Haircut and Other Stories I used twice, and when it became unavailable I ordered The Best Short Stories of Ring Lardner. As a Lardner apologist has said, Lardner is in some ways a more typical figure of the 1920s than his friend Fitzgerald. Both manifest alcoholism and a sense of doom, but Lardner shows a greater recognition of the sports and ballyhoo ingredients of the 1920s, so useful in later decades for research papers. F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story collection Babylon Revisited and Other Stories offers a short story equivalence of much of The Great Gatsby and sharply reduces the dangers

of plagiarism from the backlog of papers available on campuses on that novel. For the 1930s, Richard Wright's short story collection Uncle Tom's Children, originally issued in 1938 and in somewhat expanded form in 1940, offers possibilities for papers on Wright's protrayal of Black religion, communism, and lynching and violence.

Most frequently, however, the plays and short stories are used, not as the source of the main library research papers, but for the summing up on a comprehensive final examination. For a variety of reasons including the stress on composition, this final is always open-books, open-notebooks, with its general format described in writing well in advance of examination day. In the last round of the 1920s, the student was also asked to prepare some relevant biographical notes on Ring Lardner in advance. The final examination item on Lardner read as follows: "Write an introductory essay to Ring Lardner's famous short story 'Haircut,' placing it in relation to the following contexts: 1. the author's life, 2. the cultural history of the early 1920s (the story first appeared in the magazine Liberty in March, 1925), 3. other literary works studied in this course, 4. its success as a piece of writing, touching on such matters as title, beginning and end, overall organization, clarity of theme, transitions, use of details, figurative language, sentence structure, word choice."

At times with plays or short stories of a decade, I have used some of its brief poems in a teacher-copied, mini-anthology form, now a little thinned in keeping with the new copyright laws. On an earlier round of the 1920s, in the summing-up final, I employed Edgar Lee Masters's "Marx the Sign Painter" from The New Spoon River (1924), which relates well to the signs and advertising in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and Lewis's Arrowsmith, the featured novels that quarter. In a 1930s final, Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet "Czecho-Slovakia" called for a recapitulation of foreign affairs. In the 1940s, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" by Randall Jarrell was one of several poems used on the final to represent the horrors of World War II. For getting at racial matters in the 1950s final, I selected

Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool."

While the main literary research paper of 1,500 words and up may be based on a play or a short story collection or even an autobiography like Richard Wright's Black Boy (1945), class novels generally furnish its subject matter. Increasingly in the 1920s I have settled on two celebrated Minnesotan novelists, Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Once I balanced their novels of 1925, Arrowsmith and the Great Gatsby; and once their 1922 productions, Babbitt and The Beautiful and Damned. When I try the 1920s again, it will be with their 1920 pair, Main Street and This Side of Paradise. With these novels, certain topics such as Alcohol, the Automobile, Railroads, Underlying Biography, Religion, Clothing, Marriages, and Money Motivation have a way of developing. By retaining the same novelists but varying the novels, the teacher is in a stronger position to give advice and assistance and at the same time he reduces the odds for plagiarism. Some students will turn up their own topics like The Middle-Aged Syndrome in Babbitt or Dramatic Elements in The Beautiful and Damned, but the less inventive will want a stock of reliable suggestions. When I try Main Street, I'm hoping to get at some peculiarly Minnesota subjects like the then unassimilated German and Scandinavian immigrants so noticeable in the novel.

The teacher is able to carry his knowledge of Sinclair Lewis from the 1920s courseover to the 1930s course by selecting Lewis's It Can't Happen Here (1935) as one of the novels for study and research. As a novel, It Can't Happen Here may be growing a bit rickety, but in its reflections in fictional characters of the towering demagogues Huey Long and Adolf Hitler it offers a treasure trove for research papers on both the domestic and foreign scenes. Concentrating on the Lewis novel as the primary document, the student may pursue the ludicrous in nut movements like William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts, the ludicrous and sinister in Huey Long's Share-the Wealth, and the sinister in Adolf Hitler's Blood Purge of 1934. Two out of three times in teaching the 1930s, I was able to avoid choosing the most obvious novel, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) and

picked out instead the author's earlier novel In Dubious Battle (1936). Selecting In Dubious Battle affords a fresh approach to The Grapes of Wrath via some comparison topics like the portraiture of law enforcement officers or images of the elderly. Phases of religion and political radicalism can be examined in both Steinbeck and Wright. Wright's short story collection Uncle Tom's Children has some coverage of Blacks in the Great Depression, but it is restricted to the Deep South. Wright's novel Native Son (1940) also treats of Blacks in the Great Depression, but it employs a significantly modern setting, the Northern metropolis. I have recollections of a discerning student paper on the Chicago localization of Native Son, that is, the Chicago of the 1930s with its constricted Black ghetto that explains much of the action.

Any background one can garner on anti-Semitism by studying Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here for the 1930s transfers to the 1940s for a consideration of anti-Semitism in Arthur Laurents's play Home of the Brave or Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead. Although the Mailer novel takes place on a fictitious island in the South Pacific defended by Japanese and attacked by Americans, its wide-ranging treatment of anti-Semitism and authoritarianism in American military personnel broadens its scope and justifies its reputation as the American novel of World War II. It offers numerous points of departure for research papers. The student may write militarily of the American equipment, linguistically of the author's figures of speech, and sociologically of anti-Semitism on the home-front as presented in the soldiers' memories. For other research, I recommend comparisons of Mailer's novels to other war novels like Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940) or even to Hemingway's earlier A Farewell to Arms (1929). The primary stress of the course is on composition and not on staying within a decade, though, frequently, a decade can be comprehended better if one steps outside it for the other item in a comparison. Both times I taught the 1940s I used Richard Wright's Black Boy to deal with the race problem. Though the autobiography breathes the spirit of the 1940s, it presents some awkwardness for papers

in that the years chronicled in the narrative itself are of an earlier period. Ideally it would be better if the time of composition and the time within would coincide more, but the time discrepancy is not an overwhelming difficulty and must be faced in other decade selections.

In fact in teaching the 1950s I encountered the time discrepancy in both novels I used to get at racial matters. The first time round I selected James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), which has its main action in the 1930s, though there are numerous flashbacks even to a period preceding World War I. For some reason that term though, a group of students took up the Bible allusions in that novel and went on to write their papers on that somewhat timeless subject. Other papers focused on the New York City locale of the action so that maps of the city and particularly of the city in the Great Depression were sought. Because of these localization papers on Wright, Baldwin, and others, I store maps of New York City, Greater New York City, Chicago, and other places and get some classroom benefits out of my AAA membership.

In the second teaching of the 1950s I chose Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), which also has its narrative unfolding during the Great Depression, though it reflects the rather diffident civil rights spirit of the late 1950s when it was composed. Again a cluster of students took off on a similar topic. For some reason they elected to study the reception of the novel and the popular motion picture based on it so there were good chances to relate the book and reviews to the racial happengings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, though the Scottsboro Case originating in the 1930s needed some attention as a possible source of the fictional rape trial of the Alabama Black. Not one student that term could be lured to study the apparent localization of fictional events in the author's native Monroeville, Alabama, so I had no use for my AAA maps of Alabama.

But maps of New York City came in handy in several localization papers on J. D. Salinger's novel The Catcher in the Rye (1951). One checked out Greenwich Village, Pennsylvania Station, Grand Central Station, Rockefeller Center, Central Park, Central

Park Zoo, and a couple of museums, and tried to relate the protagonist's wanderings to the meaning of the book. For other research, I urged comparisons across the decades to somewhat equivalent works--to Booth Tarkington's Seventeen (1916) or, more widely used, to Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876). I ruled out, probably wisely, comparisons to Huck Finn as having been done too much before, and anyway Holden with his family and stake in society is more like Tom Sawyer than the loner Huck.

Besides the main fare of short and long research papers, I've tried a number of other miscellaneous activities in decades composition courses besides drawing up and defending chronological tables, summarizing, locating illustrations and arguing for their merits, and composing comprehensive final examinations. During the first few years I recruited a number of outside speakers and obtained some effective ones: a man who had observed the Nuremberg War Trials in an official capacity; a professor recalling his years of service in World War II; another professor reminiscing about his student days at St. Cloud State in the Great Depression. More recently I have ceased recruiting guest speakers, perhaps because I don't wish to continue to impose on friends and acquaintances, but also, I think, because I have difficulty relating these talks to student composition, as anything like an evaluation would be out of order. In units on the Great Depression and World War II, classes have also at times written up interviews somewhat in the manner of Studs Terkel. Again I've tended to abandon this approach, partly because it's not wise to repeat approaches. Frankly, the last few times around, I find myself spending more time on spelling, punctuation, manuscript form, and proofreading because circumstances seem to require it. I've also assigned a mini-research paper on variations in the spelling of proper nouns and difficulties occasioned by misspellings and differences like those between Fischer and Fisher, Hanson and Hansen, and Pittsburg, Kansas, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

One composition of a purely literary and analytical kind, however, has been rewarding enough to bear repeating. That composition has been the stylistic imitation or parody of an

author under study along with an accompanying analysis of the student's own imitation to demonstrate its faithfulness to the original. In illustrating authenticity, the student is asked to make at least one documented quotation from the imitated author. For example, a student might be asked to write up an episode suitable for insertion in a Ring Lardner short story, perhaps to create a rotation pool incident to go with the billiards and poker, so Alibi Ike could alibi some more while continuing to demonstrate a dazzling proficiency. Though supplying good advise against overdoing slang and bad grammar, the teacher might still derive a certain whimsical pleasure from reverse correction on the student's imitation of Lardner: suggesting that "Chicago" become "Chi," "sitting around," be changed to "settin' around," and "I don't make waves" be expanded to "I don't make no waves." Sinclair Lewis's thickly detailed style with its delight in gritty unpleasantries might also be imitated and analyzed with profit. Lewis's depiction of the formal garden in Babbitt after the conventioneers were entertained there might be matched with descriptions of unwashed tables at the student union, strewn with soft drink cans and overflowing ash trays.

Although I've launched these composition courses with subject matter dating as far back as the Armistice of 1918, I've not been able to work one any closer to the present than 1960. Actually, I itch to get at the 1960s if only to puzzle over what went so totally wrong with American life in that decade. The failure to find a satisfactory paperback history for the 1960s until recently held me back, but fortunately several months ago, a colleague in history called my attention to Jim F. Heath's Decade of Disillusionment: the Kennedy-Johnson Years (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press Midland Book, 1976). This book looks like the answer. In contrast to the informal scrappiness of the Allen and Goldman histories of the earlier periods, it is symmetrically organized and contains a meaty bibliography into which the researcher can sink his teeth. With some additional boning up, I might make the attempt winter term. Now let's see. With whatever handbook the department is employing at the time, with the Heath history and the Dell

Famous American Plays of the 1960s edited by Harold Clurman, with the Autobiography of Malcolm X (1964) and Kurt Vonnegut's novel God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), I think I could start off with a second-quarter freshman composition class in pursuit of the 1960s.

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INVITING STUDENT RESPONSES TO COMMENTS ON THEIR PAPERS

by David V. Harrington

Not only do I believe that all English teachers consider grading papers the hardest work they do, they probably also judge it to be the most frustrating. At any rate teachers will often suspect that students look only at the grades they are given and pay no attention to the kinds of errors marked or the comments urging changes in substance, style, or arrangement. Fairly often when students come in for a conference they will ask: "What can I do to improve?" as though it never occurred to them to review the comments on papers received and see if they add up to a manageable program for improvement. Some teachers will even use a personal conference as the original means for com-