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Chester D. Owens

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MAKING 'TIME' PAY DIVIDENDS

Chester D. Owens¹

Imagine a third offender, serving from 10-20 years, saying "Gee, this 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' is good stuff. No fooling, I always thought that it was only for kids." Worth-while literature, as was pointed out to the man who made the statement, is for "all the ages" not only in the sense of everlasting, but also in the sense of any chronological-age level of humans. For, one of the functions of literature is to afford "escape" and at the same time, to teach people to live better lives regardless of how old they are.

When a teacher of English faces a class of prisoners, a number of problems present themselves, which, seemingly are peculiar to this situation. Many of the men in jail agree that the most difficult subject for them when they attended school on the "outside" was English. This resulted in many leaving school without completing an elementary education, for it is during this period that stress is placed on the grammar, spelling, and composition work of English. Naturally, for the child not interested in tedious forms, truancy comes easily. This information is found in the case history of various inmates. How, then, is the teacher of these inmates to overcome a certain insouciance toward his subject matter and, at the same time, teach a basic form of adult English? One approach is through literature. There is a certain kinship between these men who

are taught in classes behind bars and some of our great writers who spent time in jail or almost did. And, again, there is material written about prisons and prisoners. These the teacher can use as a *seasoning* to make the whole dish of literature more appetizing to the inmates.

The fact that a number of writers had "spent time in jail" is not a topic the average teacher of English would single out—rather, the building of character and correct attitudes toward society are emphasized by the reading of these writers. But, the idea of "doing time" and profiting by it has acted as a good introduction to stimulate, in our class, an interest in the better writers. The mental attitudes to assume—the methods of spending time—these are vital issues to each inmate when he enters jail to begin his sentence. Quite a few seek further education in our non-compulsory school system. With these, then, this method of approach is being used. It is surprising, when one inquires, to note how many of the great writers: "did time" ranging from four days to nineteen years, and, also, the use to which they put their periods of incarceration.

Though they became members of "The Living Dead" or "The Damned," as prisoners are often called, they became very much alive and acquitted themselves to the extent of becoming pioneers in how to make time in prison

¹ Teacher of Adult Education Woodbourne

Institution, Woodbourne, New York.

pay dividends. In other words, they took a negative situation and turned it into a positive one. Even Wilde, though he states that only the good in man wastes and withers in jail and that each day seems a year whose days are very long, found time in his imprisonment of two years to write his "Apology for My Life" and his exceptional "Ballad of Reading Gaol." O. Henry paid his debt of three years and three months to society and at the same time settled down to short-story writing and became one of the best in his class. He became the theme center of Lindsay's "The Knight in Disguise," and also of Leacock's "The Amazing Genius of O. Henry." His "Gift of the Magi," "Retrieved Reformation" (dramatized as "Alias Jimmy Valentine"), "Sisters of the Golden Circle," and "After Twenty Years" are singular.

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep. And as I slept, I dreamed a dream." The den was Bedford jail. The lines—those of Bunyan as he opens "Pilgrim's Progress." This, the men learned, he wrote while serving a short sentence. It became the greatest allegory in the English language and was translated into one hundred and eight dialects and languages. During another period of penal servitude of twelve years, he wrote nine books including: "Grace Abounding," "The Holy City," "Life and Death of Mr. Badman," "The Holy War," and "Confessions of My Faith."

"Don Quixote" is prefaced by Cer-

vantes as "You may suppose this book to be the Child of Disturbance, engendered in some dismal Prison, where wretchedness keeps its Residence and Every Dismal Sound its Habitation." He drew dividends on his time in Sevilla prison, for he pondered on the problem of satirizing the gallants of the day and so created the story of the mad knight—"The Luminary and Mirror of the Knight-Errantry."

"Robinson Crusoe" became one of the forerunners of our novel, and Defoe, its author, benefited by his contacts with inmates in a two-year stay which gave him source materials for his stories of thievery and plundering such as "Jonathan Wild," "Captain Avery," and others. His "Hymn to the Pillory" was created during his imprisonment in Newgate. The same Newgate to which Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker, went in 1813 to begin the prison reforms in vogue to-day. Her talks to the women prisoners led to the formation of a schooling system for the children of inmates, as well as young offenders, which was spread ultimately over many countries with Elizabeth Fry as prison adviser. The Association which she headed had for its aims² "The much-needed establishment of what are now regarded as the first principles of prison discipline, such as the separation of the sexes, classification of criminals, female supervision for the women, and adequate provision for their religious and secular instruction, as also for their useful employment.—Through a visit to Ireland, which she made in 1827, she was led to direct her attention to the other houses of detention besides pri-

² Encyclopedia Britannica.

sons; and her observations resulted in many improvements in the British hospital system, and in the treatment of the insane."

"We have a great respect for Mrs. Fry, but she certainly ought to have written more romances than Mrs. Radcliffe" is the sarcastic comment of Dickens in "Criminal Courts." It is an interesting commentary on one of the outstanding reformers in prison work from one of the great social writers of the period. It is, perhaps, a revelation more of Dickens' attitude toward women rather than his attitude toward the program she advocated.

In his "Visit to Newgate" he describes the school there in the words—"We were led through a narrow yard to the 'school'—a portion of the prison set apart for boys under fourteen years of age. In a tolerable-sized room, in which were writing materials and some copy books, was the schoolmaster, with a couple of his pupils; the remainder having been fetched from an adjoining apartment; the whole were drawn up in a line for our inspection. There was not a redeeming feature among them—not a glance of honesty—not a wink expressive of anything but the gallows and the hulks, in the whole collection."

When discussing Dickens, we found that although Dickens, himself, never was sent to jail, his father found himself incarcerated for indebtedness. The result was that Dickens had to leave school at eleven years of age to go to work in a blacking firm. Here he obtained his picture of "David Copperfield" which proved to be his masterpiece. This is what might be called an

indirect effect on our literature. How far the numerous experiences of Dickens affected his writings is evidenced in his great socio-economic novels. His description of Mr. Chivery in "Little Dorrit," no doubt, resulted from a talk with his father or from his visits to Newgate. The prison guard is "a man of few words, and it may be here observed, that he had a professional habit of locking everything up. He locked himself up as carefully as he locked up the Marshalsea debtors. Even the custom of bolting his meals may have been a part of an uniform whole; but there is no question, that, as to all other purposes he kept his mouth as tightly closed as he kept the Marshalsea door."

Now, to speak generally, the following bits of information added to the intellectual growth of the students. Tyndale, who translated the Bible, was arrested and later strangled and burned at the stake. Malory in his nineteen years behind the walls made the prose translation from the French of "Morte d'Arthur." The number of books totaled twenty-one, and they proved to be a "most pleasant jumble and summary of the legends about Arthur." Thoreau, because of his anarchistical views, refused to pay the poll tax and "did time" as a result. His "Civil Disobedience" was used as a handbook by Mahatma Gandhi and he, in turn, found himself imprisoned on three different occasions. Gatehouse jail was the home of Lovelace for two separate periods for writing Kentish petitions to the House of Commons. These terms served to nurture his "To Althea: From Prison" and his "Lucasta."

Could such a place as the Tower of London help our literature? The men in the class seem to think so. Macaulay in "History of London" describes the Tower as, "Thither have been carried through successive ages, by the rude hands of gaolers, without one mourner following, the bleeding relics of men who had been captains of armies, the leaders of parties, the oracles of senates, and the ornaments of the courts." Sir Walter Raleigh, of the tobacco and coat incidents, had several short terms and a longer one of thirteen years there. During the latter, he contemplated a many-volumed "History of the World," although he completed but one volume during his stay.

Bacon served the Crown for 41 years and had a number of honors heaped on him in that time. Then he faced the House of Lords and sentence was passed on him for accepting a bribe. He was imprisoned in the Tower, barred from public office, and fined £40,000. Bacon spent four days in the Tower. He was released by the order of King James and the fine was remitted. The five years of life remaining for Bacon saw him develop to the fullest the scientific and philosophic works of his which were to become the foundation of our modern scientific methods. Then, too, it was easy to tie-up Bacon with Shakespeare, when we studied the Bard, on the subject of the Baconian theory.

Also, we talked about William Penn who spent nine months, as well as several other terms, in the Tower. During the former, he wrote his "No Cross, No Crown" and also dreamed of a

country wherein religious freedom could be found. Pennsylvania resulted from this constructive "day dreaming." In addition, he wrote his "Some Fruits of Solitude" and "More Fruits of Solitude." In the former, we find, "The School of Solitude is one few care to learn in, tho' none instructs us better.—The author now has had some Time he could call his own; a property he was never so much Master of before; In which he has taken a View of himself and the World; and observed wherein he hath hit and Mist the Mark; What might have been, what amended, and what avoided in his Human Conduct.—And verily he thinks were he to live over his life again, he could not only, with God's grace serve Him, but his Neighbor and himself, better than he hath done, and have Seven Years of his Time to spare. And this is the rather said that it might quicken, Thee, Reader, to lose none of the Time that is thine. There is nothing of which we are apt to be so lavish as of Time, and about which we ought to be more solicitous, since without it we can do nothing in the world."

At another time, we studied Sir Thomas More, who, because of his opposition to Henry VIII, was thrown into the Tower and was later executed. While his "Utopia" was written before his imprisonment, he did write his "Dialogue Against Tribulation" there. And, Pepys, the diarian, resided on three occasions within the limits of the Tower's walls. His "Memoires of the Royal Navy" was germinating during his last sentence. This was the only work published by him during his life.

His diary, translated at a later date, afforded intimate glimpses of seventeenth-century England to the class.

In passing, perhaps, one of the more interesting episodes in American penology concerns Eugene Debs, who, in his second term, which was for ten years, became the presidential nominee for the Socialist party and received 915,302 votes while in jail.. His "Walls and Bars" was published posthumously.

Related to the subject of those writers who actually were in penal institutions is the subject of how many of the great writers came close to living behind the bars. There was a number of them and their accusations were almost as numerous as they. How they "beat the rap" always interests inmate students. For instance, Wyclif's ecclesiastical views could easily have had him imprisoned, but he eluded his enemies. However, after he died, his bones were dug up and burned at the order of Pope Martin V. If his end had come sooner, the world might have lost the Vulgate. Then the attention of the students was drawn to Marlowe's atheistical views which caused a warrant to be issued for his arrest. "The Jew of Malta," "Dr. Faustus," and the possible collaboration with Shakespeare on "Titus Andronicus" are among his contributions. And, Shakespeare, himself, had to leave his home town for fear of a term as a poacher. Yet this departure was the *coup de grâce* which turned him toward London and eternal fame. Many of the men in an institution will vociferously defend the lines "Measure for Measure."

"The jury, passing on the prisoner's life,

May in the sworn twelve have a thief
or two
Guiltier than him they try."

Or, again resorting to hyperbole, take the lines of the ghost of Hamlet's father in a subjective manner,

"But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold, whose lightest
word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy
young blood—
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from
their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on
end,
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine."

At the time of the Restoration, Milton opposed the return of the Stuarts and his writings gave him trouble with Parliament. His "Areopagitica" and tractates on "Divorce" caused considerable feeling against him in spite of the visionary outlooks espoused in each.

In America, the opposition of Patrick Henry (to cite but a single example) to England made him subject to a charge of treason in 1765 when he advocated the rights of colonists to legislate for themselves. Yet his "Liberty or Death" in 1775 at the Second Revolutionary Congress with its "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George the Third may profit by their example. If this be treason make the most of it" is familiar to each American school child.

In Scotland, Scott, who promulgated the story of Queen Elizabeth, Sir Walter Raleigh, the coat, and the mud puddle, found himself in debt. He was rescued, to a degree, from debtors' prison by Constable who made an ad-

vance on the proposed Waverly novels. Carlyle has described these novels as "The great fact about them is that they were faster written and better paid for than any other books in the whole world." Still later, the heavy crush of an indebtedness amounting to \$600,000 at 55 years of age, was the force needed to catapult him into writing twenty novels in ten years. Robert Burns, in his dying hour, wrote to a friend asking for a loan of three pounds, and concluded by saying, "Save me from going to jail." Another saved by the timely intervention of a friend was Oliver Goldsmith, the author of "Vicar of Wakefield" when his friend, Samuel Johnson, came to his rescue financially. It is in Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" that we find

"Then mark what ill the scholar's life
assail,—
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the
jail."

The information on the number of writers who spent time in jail, or nearly did, is easily woven in with the general pattern of literature. Another strand used to brighten up the pattern is what might be called "prison literature." Who hasn't read and sympathized with the "Count of Monte Cristo"? The mope (escape) and revenge of Dantes are always interesting points. Who hasn't felt definite vicarious reactions to "The Prisoner of Chillon," "The Prisoner of Zenda," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "I am a Fugitive," "Escape to Prison," "Each Dawn I Die," or "Dry Guillotine"? The latter, by Belbenoit, has influenced, to an extent, the French in their recent decision to abolish Devil's Island. And, mentioning again, but as an opportunity to study the short story, the following;

"Retrieved Reformation," "After Twenty Years," and "The Sisters of the Golden Circle." Isn't there an ideal approach to patriotism in "The Man Without a Country"? Certainly those portions where Nolan is avidly reading an article in a newspaper and then finding a section is cut out because of censorship are recognizable as within the realm of experience of the men behind bars. There is a type of philosophy for men in gray in "To Althea: From Prison," as well as in the "Ballad of Reading Gaol." The very recent book, "So I Went to Prison" by O'Brien gives her experiences in Bedford Prison for Women.

How much more assiduously the authors and books listed above, if available in the prison library, are read by the men in the English class is borne out by the reports submitted. The interest in the "time-serving" authors by such requests as "What else did he write that's good?" is in a preponderance as compared with the requests for the literature of other writers. Altogether, then, this approach to richer living in literature for inmates has warranted itself by, in some cases, an awakened desire to read, and in others, an extension of their literary horizons. The men are learning how to make "time" pay them dividends by broadening their knowledge and they do this by studying those who used their "time" to advantage as well as their contemporaries who were never behind bars.

They feel with Lacydes when someone said to him, as he was studying geometry very late in life, "Is it a time for you to be learning now?" "If it is not," he replied, "when will it be?"