

THAT'S IT, AMERICAN LIT

By Michael Ventura

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Six weeks of a daily class, the last these high school seniors will attend. It's spring, graduation is near, senioritis is rampant, so why should the kids care? College? I tell them, "I don't care if you go to college; I care that you survive, with your spirit intact. What you'll read in this class helped me survive. It may help some of you." They're making eye contact. That's good. "You'll read every night. The first 10-15 minutes or so of class you'll write about your reading; then we'll talk. If you do the reading, you'll sail. If you don't, you're screwed." They take that in. "I'm not going to spiel you about fulfilling your potential – you've heard all that. The world doesn't care if you fulfill your potential. My brother told me, 'You know what the world says to you, Mike? The world says, "HEY! You! Keep walkin'!"' As long as you're not blocking traffic, the world doesn't concern itself. Which is why there's that quote on the blackboard, Rudolph Steiner. 'Our highest endeavor [as teachers] must be: Develop free human beings who are able, *in themselves*, to impart purpose and direction in their lives.'" A pause. "OK, this is American Literature."

With that, I read them Thomas Wolfe's "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" – a story in Brooklyn dialect about an out-of-town guy, Wolfe (1900-1938), who's got a map of Brooklyn. He sees words on the map that he likes – "Red Hook," "Bensonhurst" – and explores those streets at night, streets that were then the meanest of the mean. The guy narrating the story can't make heads or tails of Wolfe. He tells him, "Map or no map, yuh ain't gonna get to know Brooklyn wit no map." And finally: "I wondeh if someone knocked him on duh head, or if he's still wanderin' aroun' in duh subway in duh middle of duh night wit his little map! ... Maybe he's found out by now dat he'll neveh live long enough to know duh whole of Brooklyn. It'd take a guy a lifetime to know Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo. An' even den, yuh wouldn't know it all."

"Me and your other teachers," I say, "we're giving you a map. But the map isn't Brooklyn. It's good that you have it. Helps you get around, helps you know what's out there. But – the map isn't Brooklyn. Some college professors think that the map is Brooklyn – but people can only afford to think that way if they live their whole lives in a college. Maps are good, but after you leave here you've got to explore Brooklyn – wherever and whatever your 'Brooklyn' may be."

First reading: "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Washington Irving (1783-1859). Not a ghost story but a satire about American materialism – already a notable national trait circa 1820. But why? Maybe because here was the first Western country where a working person, a poor person, could hope one day to own land and to rise higher in society than his parents. Here common people might become the lords and ladies of their own manors – so, in that then-wild hope, materialism was etched into the American character. We equated it too much with the concept of liberty, and, for better and for worse, it's been how we do liberty – but it was also essential to individual liberty (I stress "was"). Is it now? What really makes you free?

Next reading: "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). The Framers called our constitution an "experiment." Little did they guess that if you free the polity,

you also free the psyche. Poe was the first to intuit that our revolution had, for the first time in history, liberated the human psyche, on all levels, in all ways, for all citizens. He knew darkness as well as light had been freed from its subconscious confinement, and he feared that this freedom would exact a price. He may or may not have known that the very structure of our personalities would be changed, but he suspected as much.

Then "Another View of Hester," from *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864). He takes up Poe's great theme. In the characters of Hester Prynne and her daughter, Pearl, he suggests what these newly liberated inner qualities might become; but in the characters of the Rev. Dimmesdale and Dr. Chillingworth, Hawthorne demonstrates how destructive the psyche's liberation can be for the weak and repressed. But, ah, Hester. "The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and wider range than for many centuries before." She envisions a new way of life: "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit ... is to be essentially modified." In other words, we'd be in for quite a ride.

Then excerpts of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville (1819-1891). He says it's chaos out there!

Then *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Others may be afraid or suspicious of liberty, but not he. On the first page, what does he do? Strips naked and rolls in the grass! And invites everyone, man and woman, to do the same. (And Whitman came from Brooklyn!)

Then Miss Emily, as I always call her, Emily Dickinson (1830-1896), who's also ready to dance: "Ten of my once-stately toes/Are marshaled for a jig!" But "Amputate my freckled bosom!" – if that's what it takes to be free. Melville sees evil in a whale? She sees it in a fly. "I heard a fly buzz when I died." "The mob within the heart/Police cannot suppress." That doesn't scare her, though her metaphor for the soul is explosive: "But since we got a Bomb –/And held it in our Bosom –/Nay – Hold it – it is calm –" Hers is, anyway. (What does it take to be free?)

The psyche freed with the polity! Freed even, says Mark Twain (1835-1910), to reject civilization totally. Huck Finn does (we read excerpts). He lives by his own code and lights out for "the territories." Also: Twain is the first American to write without an English accent. After Twain, only Henry James would sound English. America's English had become a language.

But we need an antidote to the racism of *Huckleberry Finn*'s society (NOT the novel, the society). So we jump chronology to excerpts from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). Then James Baldwin's (1924-1987) essay "A Stranger in the Village," which ends: "The world is white no longer, and will never be white again."

Back to chronology. Stephen Crane (1871-1900), the breakthrough of "The Open Boat." Crane taught the basics of the modern tone, the modern style. No time for Jack London's dire vision. No time for John Reed's 1912 *Insurgent Mexico*, his journalism employing narrative strategies that would become Hemingway's template. But time enough for Willa Cather (1876-1947), her adventurously sensual "Coming, Aphrodite!" – a painter and a singer in Greenwich Village circa early 1900s, the first generation to explore freedoms my high school seniors take for granted. Then Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), his stories ("Hands" and "Adventure") of simpler people in small towns dying inside for want of those same freedoms. Then Hemingway (1899-1961): "The

Killers" (which invented movie-style dialogue) and "A Clean Well Lighted Place." His is the basis for most prose since, including the prose of many who hate (and shamelessly simplify) Hemingway. Here, also, see the despair of characters more real than Huck, people whose codes are not enough and whose liberty leaves them lost. Freedom is beautiful and dangerous. You cannot separate its danger from its beauty. You cannot have one without the other. And that has been the theme of American writers from our beginnings, when Jefferson composed the Declaration and made happiness a *political* goal. (How will you be free?)

All this in four weeks, all of us working hard (including the few who work hard to avoid working). No time for Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Henry Miller, Nin. Two weeks left for a novel, Nathanael West (1903-1940), *The Day of the Locust* – for West was the first to understand that cinema (the creation of "media") deeply realigns the self-images of everyone, high-culture and low. He saw that cinema created impossibly high personal expectations; he feared that the disappointment of those expectations would be destructive personally and collectively – our psyches liberated such that people would have much more to deal with, psychologically, than in any previous era. The conflagration he foresaw was metaphoric: a burning-through of all assumptions and structures that had come before. Will you let beauty itself die before that onslaught, or will you take Whitman's cue – and Miss Emily's, Hurston's, Baldwin's, Twain's, Cather's – and give yourselves the task of forging new and stronger values through which liberty's danger and beauty can fashion what my generation cannot imagine and what yours might or might not live up to?

No time for postwar, so that's it, American Lit. Now go find your Brooklyn.

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