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Mental Hygiene through the Study of Literature

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# ROUND TABLE

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## ULYSSES SPEAKS

Orson Welles claims to be the originator of the first-person approach in the dramatization of a novel on the air. I have copied his technique in presenting the *Odyssey* to a ninth-year class, or, rather, in having the class present it as an Orson Welles dramatization with Ulysses as narrator. The sound effects are lusty but gruesome at times—the squeals and grunts of pigs, the thumps and groans of slain suitors, mountain tops being hurled into pails of water, the footsteps of giants, to say nothing of the sizzling of burning flesh. I can see possibilities for applying this technique to other novels.

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## MENTAL HYGIENE THROUGH THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

Mental hygiene is a science which attempts to prevent and alleviate emotional conflict. While it is important for every school to have on its staff persons specially trained in mental hygiene and guidance procedures and equally important for every classroom teacher to be sensitive to the inner lives and problems of adolescents, the work of specialists and teachers will be greatly aided if the mental-hygiene implications of the various subject matters are fully realized.

The English classroom allows many opportunities for applying mental-hygiene principles,<sup>1</sup> the study of literature affording particularly direct avenues to the emotional concerns of young people. The fifty book-report topics presented here have been found very helpful in this connection though they also serve to enhance the interest of literature for its own sake.

The student is instructed to sum up in a few sentences the theme of the book he has read, the limit here being one hundred words. He is then to

<sup>1</sup> A full treatment of this subject will be found in the author's paper, "Mental Hygiene through Procedures in the English Classroom," *Yearbook of the New York Society for the Experimental Study of Education* (1937).

discuss the story in terms of any three topics, devoting about a paragraph to each one. His report ends with a question that arose in his mind about something in the story which puzzled him or which he failed to understand. At the conclusion of the student's presentation, which is read or delivered orally to the class, his classmates and the teacher have the privilege of asking him to discuss the book further in light of any topics they deem particularly suitable should the book prove sufficiently interesting to the group. These topics are designed for novels, plays, and short stories as well as for nonfiction of all kinds. They may also be used with motion pictures and radio programs.

For many of the topics the writer is indebted to suggestions originally made by students. Over a period of several years the young people were invited to offer new topics, and some of the best ones were received this way, though many required rephrasing. Topics 4, 5, and 6 appeared originally in a *High Points* article, the authorship and date of which the writer no longer recalls. Topics 17-22, inclusive, were suggested by Charles W. Raubicheck, co-chairman of the English department of Evan-der Childs High School. The list of topics has been revised five times and represents the result of classroom experience with about three thousand students of all terms of English in high school.

1. Does the book answer any questions or solve any perplexities or problems you have faced?
2. Does it say or show something you have felt or noticed but haven't been able to find words for until now?
3. Does it contain experiences which (a) you know and already have had; (b) you know about but never have had yourself; (c) you never knew until you came across them now in the book?
4. How does the setting compare with your own surroundings?
5. Are the people of the story similar to or different from the people you meet in everyday life? Are they any more kind or cruel, more or less educated, more or less tolerant, wiser, more or less superstitious, or more thoughtless than the people you know?
6. Are the things that happen to these characters more or less exciting, interesting, complicated, depressing, or inspiring than the things that happen to you and to people you know? Would you exchange your life for theirs?
7. State an important problem that one or more characters is faced with and tell whether each solves his problem successfully or not?
8. Did each of the characters deserve the fate he received? Does the author play favorites? How is the character's fate related to what he is and what he does?
9. Does it contain the kind of villain you *admire*, hero or heroine you dislike?

10. Was there any time when you wanted to be with a particular character, talking to him or her, advising, helping, hurting?
11. Has the book given you anything which you can apply to your own experience, enabling you to handle life more successfully?
12. With what attitude toward life does this leave you? Fear, hope, joy that you are alive, suspicion of people, discontent with your surroundings?
13. Does the book remind you of your troubles, help you forget them, or suggest new ones?
14. Judging by what has happened to the people in the story and the causes responsible, what factors seem to make for our happiness in life? What do human beings want, and why do some get what they want, and others don't? Why are some able to overcome obstacles while others cannot?
15. How long will the author's solution of his character's problems endure?
16. Start from where the author has left the characters at the end of the book, imagine the story carried forward a number of years.
17. The slightest incident can alter an entire life.
18. To what extent does this book give instances of people who suffer or who prosper because of devotion to ideals or principles?
19. Under the same circumstances I would have felt or acted as one of the characters did.
20. I have gained a greater sympathy and understanding of the thoughts and feelings of people who are not exactly like me, or of people I once misunderstood.
21. Why I would like certain people to read this book—old, young, rich, poor, contented, handicapped, timid, reckless, selfish, successful, and beaten.
22. Does your book tell what it means to be rich, poor, middle class? Does it show which one of these classes is better off, happier, healthier?
23. Does this book make you forget your surroundings?
24. Which character does the author like the most?
25. Does the book throw any light on why authors put their favorite characters to death.
26. Select those students in the class who could best play the roles of characters in the story. Tell why you selected each particular student.
27. If you were in the place of your favorite character, what would you have done?
28. Do you like happy or unhappy endings? Explain, with examples from your book.
29. Can you see resemblances between characters in your book and members of your family, your friends, your teachers?
30. In what ways are you like or unlike the chief character?
31. Is the motive for committing a wrong act or a crime a good one?
32. What is the most important thing that ever happened to the chief character (or to your favorite character) and compare this with the most important thing that ever has happened in your life.
33. Take your favorite character and make a list of his best points and his

- worst. How do his good habits and qualities compare with those of some particular person you know very well in real life? Compare his bad habits and qualities with those of some person you know well.
34. Is there one completely happy character in the book? If so, describe what you think are the reasons for his happiness.
  35. Select one of the most unhappy characters in the book and describe what you think are the reasons for his unhappiness.
  36. What seems to be the controlling force in your favorite character's activity: reason (intelligence), blind impulse, some powerful emotion like hate or fear, obedience to discipline, sense of duty, loyalty, desire to do good, etc.?
  37. At what moment did your favorite character experience his greatest triumph? Compare this with one of your own greatest triumphs.
  38. Did the book encourage or spoil any hope you had for the future?
  39. Did the book end the way you wanted it to? Did the book end too soon? Would you like to hear more about the characters?
  40. Does your book show that it is better to live on the spur of the moment, taking the consequences, or that it is wiser to choose only those experiences which we are sure will bring us happiness?
  41. Would you like to have any particular character as father, mother, friend, teacher, sweetheart, brother, sister, husband, wife, next-door neighbor, companion on a camping trip, or near you in an emergency?
  42. According to your book, what do most young people need in order to be happy? Take the chief young characters one by one and show what each one needed and wanted and whether he obtained it or not.
  43. Which character in the story is least understood by the others?
  44. Do the lives led by some of the characters make you very dissatisfied with your own life and surroundings?
  45. Does the story throw any light on whether a person should pay his entire life for one mistake he has made?
  46. Did anyone in the book try to reach a certain goal but fail to do so? Was he happier because he did *not* get what he originally wanted? If you were in his place, do you think you could accomplish what he failed to do? How?
  47. Does the author exaggerate the innocence, kindness, wickedness, stupidity, etc., of any characters in the story?
  48. Do you prefer your villain to remain completely bad to the end of the story or would you rather have him finally turn good and reform?
  49. What is the worst fault of your hero or heroine and compare that with the worst faults in real people you know?
  50. Does the villain (or the meanest or cruelest person in the story) have any good qualities? What are they?

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