

Caroline Shrodes / Harry Finestone / Michael Shugrue

THE CONSCIOUS READER



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READINGS PAST
AND PRESENT

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Foreword

... the unexamined life is not worth living.
from The Apology

In a recent paper, Alvin Toffler stated that we are moving through a basic historic transformation with profound implications for the future of language, poetry, and metaphor. In an increasingly complex world, which will demand correspondingly complex choices, he suggests that it would be tragic, even criminal, not to pay more attention to values. He deplores the fact that students can go through twelve years of schooling without ever once having been urged to ask themselves such ultimate questions as "What's life about? What am I here for? What's better than something else? What's worth dying for?" He adds that education should place new emphasis on analogy, allegory, metaphor, poetry, art, and other forms of perception that reveal glimpses of alternative lives.

Believing that the development of writing skills depends on the heightening of consciousness, the editors of *The Conscious Reader* invite the imaginative examination of possible and probable futures of man and society and concentration on the basic questions that writers since Plato have posed. Although the readings engage our contemporary interest by their subjects and their styles, they also reflect, in their focus on issues of universal concern, the continuity between past and present. In a composition course with multiple goals, the readings serve as a catalyst to self-expression, extend our capacity for thought and feeling, sharpen our perceptions, and widen our sympathies. By a reciprocal process, heightened consciousness through reading develops effective writing, and the act of writing fosters self-definition. As awareness is extended by reading, we may become increasingly conscious of the reservoir of memories and experiences from which to draw and the variety of forms and techniques that give shape to our writing.

Approximately two thirds of these readings are expository. Some of the essays are personal and readily comprehensible and provide models, in both content and form, for early writing experiments. Others are more complex

Foreword

and should help to develop the ability to reason abstractly. Although most of the authors in this text are accomplished literary stylists, there are a number of selections by writers who are primarily distinguished for their contributions to modern thought in the areas of popular culture, science, philosophy, and the social and behavioral sciences. The inclusion of imaginative literature needs no special justification in a composition course. It may serve a number of important goals: to enhance the pleasure of reading, to educate the emotions as well as the mind, to provide vicarious experience with which to test the ideas expressed in discursive prose, and to open up possibilities for original creative efforts. The dramatic situations, vivid character portrayals, and verbal compression in fiction and poetry also suggest techniques that may enliven expository writing. In addition to providing models, a large repertoire of forms, stylistic devices, and voices, imaginative literature provides an eloquent description of alternative values by which to live. In responding to it we may act out imaginatively a variety of roles and discover, in Kenneth Burke's words, a number of "strategies for encompassing situations." In a few instances, titles have been devised by us for some selections taken from longer works.

The suggestions for discussion and writing included in Appendix A are designed to explore multiple levels of understanding. They invite the reading of each selection with careful attention to thought and structure as well as to the comparison of individual experience with the vision of life expressed by its author. The exploration of cultural patterns both similar and alien to our own should encourage a continuing dialectic in classroom discussion as well as in writing.

The thematic groupings represent an arbitrary but convenient division of the book. The readings begin with the search for self and move to consideration of the self in relation to others—parents, friends, and lovers. The next section focuses on art and society and includes discussions of both the popular culture and the cultural tradition. The readings continue in the fourth section with a variety of statements concerning our failures and our aspirations to insure for all people a sense of freedom and human dignity. The fifth section explores many facets of the world of the future. The book concludes by focusing on the examined life. The selections mediate between scientific progress and human concerns and then return full circle to the individual's search for meaning and value. If there is a dominant theme in these readings, it is that neither understanding of the past nor projections of the future can eliminate conflict from our lives and that opposing forces in the self and the society are a part of the human condition. Indeed, it is vital that they contend. For it is primarily through conscious recognition and expression of these conflicting forces that we may find our way to a tolerance of ambiguity and to an increased freedom of choice.

C. S.
H. F.
M.S.

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