

Classic Works Assignment 20

- *poetry memorization*. Memorize **stanzas 1-2** of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" in your reader.
- *fictional letter*. If you have not already, please send in your fictional letter by email.
- *multiple perspectives essay*. The greatest problem in the world (or America) is _____. You will fill in the blank and write an essay about it. We will be reading an essay (attached) in which the author that *slouch* is the big problem that plagues America. The essay will not be due until **the second week in March**.
- *literature*. Read *Great Expectations*, chapters 21–30. I will give you a quiz on the content of the book. Again, I have posted the book under "Materials Needed" on the assignment page. Continue to think about the various characters in "Great Expectations" and the purpose they serve in the novel.
- *picture*. The picture on the right is of Magwitch making himself known to Pip.



Long Range Assignments

- That mysterious book report that has been talked about for so long will actually be due on **the first week of March**.
- *multiple perspectives essay*. You will be writing an essay about the greatest problem in America. The essay will not be due until **the second week in March**.

Slouch

By Eliot Gregory

I should like to see, in every school-room of our growing country, in every business office, at the railway stations, and on street corners, large placards placed with "Do not slouch" printed thereon in distinct and imposing characters. If ever there was a tendency that needed nipping in the bud (I fear the bud is fast becoming a full-blown flower), it is this discouraging national failing.

Each year when I return from my spring wanderings, among the benighted and effete nations of the Old World, on whom the untravelled American looks down from the height of his superiority, I am struck anew by the contrast between the trim, well-groomed officials left behind on one side of the ocean and the happy-go-lucky, slouching individuals I find on the other.

As I ride up town this unpleasant impression deepens. In the "little Mother Isle" I have just left, bus-drivers have quite a coaching air, with hat and coat of knowing form. They sport flowers in their button-holes and salute other bus-drivers, when they meet, with a twist of whip and elbow refreshingly correct, showing that they take pride in their calling, and have been at some pains to turn themselves out as smart in appearance as finances would allow.

Here, on the contrary, the stage and cab drivers I meet seem to be under a blight, and to have lost all interest in life. They lounge on the box, their legs straggling aimlessly, one hand holding the reins, the other hanging dejectedly by the side. Yet there is little doubt that these heartbroken citizens are earning double what their London CONFRERES gain. The shadow of the national peculiarity is over them.

When I get to my rooms, the elevator boy is reclining in the lift, and hardly raises his eye-lids as he languidly manoeuvres the rope. I have seen that boy now for months, but never when his boots and clothes were brushed or when his cravat was not riding proudly above his collar. On occasions I have offered him pins, which he took wearily, doubtless because it was less trouble than to refuse. The next day, however, his cravat again rode triumphant, mocking my efforts to keep it in its place. His hair, too, has been a cause of wonder to me. How does he manage to have it always so long and so unkempt? More than once, when expecting callers, I have bribed him to have it cut, but it seemed to grow in the night, back to its poetic profusion.

In what does this noble disregard for appearances which characterizes American men originate? Our climate, as some suggest, or discouragement at not all being millionaires? It more likely comes from an absence with us of the military training that abroad goes so far toward licking young men into shape.

I shall never forget the surprise on the face of a French statesman to whom I once expressed my sympathy for his country, laboring under the burden of so vast a standing army. He answered:

"The financial burden is doubtless great; but you have others. Witness your pension expenditures. With us the money drawn from the people is used in such a way as to be of inestimable value to them. We take the young hobbledehoy¹ farm-hand or mechanic, ignorant, mannerless, uncleanly as he may be, and turn him out at the end of three years with his regiment, self-respecting and well-mannered, with habits of cleanliness and obedience, having acquired a bearing, and a love of order that will cling to and serve him all his life. We do not go so far," he added, "as our English neighbors in drilling men into superb manikins of 'form' and carriage. Our authorities do not consider it necessary. But we reclaim youths from the slovenliness of their native village or workshop and make them tidy and mannerly citizens."

These remarks came to mind the other day as I watched a group of New England youths lounging on the steps of the village store, or sitting in rows on a neighboring fence, until I longed to try if even a judicial arrangement of tacks, 'business-end up,' on these favorite seats would infuse any energy into their movements. I came to the conclusion that my French acquaintance was right, for the only trim-looking men to be seen, were either veterans of our war or youths belonging to the local militia. And nowhere does one see finer specimens of humanity than West Point and Annapolis turn out.

If any one doubts what kind of men slouching youths develop into, let him look when he travels, at the dejected appearance of the farmhouses throughout our land. Surely our rural populations are not so much poorer than those of other countries. Yet when one compares the dreary homes of even our well-to-do farmers with the smiling, well-kept hamlets seen in England or on the Continent, such would seem to be the case.

If ours were an old and bankrupt nation, this air of discouragement and decay could not be greater. Outside of the big cities one looks in vain for some sign of American dash and enterprise in the appearance of our men and their homes.

During a journey of over four thousand miles, made last spring as the guest of a gentleman who knows our country thoroughly, I was impressed most painfully with this abject air. Never in all those days did we see a fruit-tree trained on some sunny southern wall, a smiling flower-garden or carefully clipped hedge. My host told me that hardly the necessary vegetables are grown, the inhabitants of the West and South preferring canned food. It is less trouble!

If you wish to form an idea of the extent to which slouch prevails in our country, try to start a "village improvement society," and experience, as others have done, the apathy and ill-will of the inhabitants when you go about among them and strive to summon some of their local pride to your aid.

In the town near which I pass my summers, a large stone, fallen from a passing dray, lay for days in the middle of the principal street, until I paid some boys to remove

¹ **hobbledehoy** an awkward teenager

it. No one cared, and the dull-eyed inhabitants would doubtless be looking at it still but for my impatience.

One would imagine the villagers were all on the point of moving away (and they generally are, if they can sell their land), so little interest do they show in your plans. Like all people who have fallen into bad habits, they have grown to love their slatternly ways and cling to them, resenting furiously any attempt to shake them up to energy and reform.

The farmer has not, however, a monopoly. Slouch seems ubiquitous. Our railway and steam-boat systems have tried in vain to combat it, and supplied their employees with a livery (I beg the free and independent voter's pardon, a uniform!), with but little effect. The inherent tendency is too strong for the corporations. The conductors still shuffle along in their spotted garments, the cap on the back of the head, and their legs anywhere, while they chew gum in defiance of the whole Board of Directors.

Go down to Washington, after a visit to the Houses of Parliament or the Chamber of Deputies, and observe the contrast between the bearing of our Senators and Representatives and the air of their CONFRES abroad. Our law-makers seem trying to avoid every appearance of "smartness." Indeed, I am told, so great is the prejudice in the United States against a well-turned-out man that a candidate would seriously compromise his chances of election who appeared before his constituents in other than the accustomed shabby frock-coat, unbuttoned and floating, a pot hat, no gloves, as much doubtfully white shirt-front as possible, and a wisp of black silk for a tie; and if he can exhibit also a chin-whisker, his chances of election are materially increased.

Nothing offends an eye accustomed to our native LAISSER ALLER so much as a well-brushed hat and shining boots. When abroad, it is easy to spot a compatriot as soon and as far as you can see one, by his graceless gait, a cross between a lounge and a shuffle. In reading-, or dining-room, he is the only man whose spine does not seem equal to its work, so he flops and straggles until, for the honor of your land, you long to shake him and set him squarely on his legs.

No amount of reasoning can convince me that outward slovenliness is not a sign of inward and moral supineness. A neglected exterior generally means a lax moral code. The man who considers it too much trouble to sit erect can hardly have given much time to his tub or his toilet. Having neglected his clothes, he will neglect his manners, and between morals and manners we know the tie is intimate.

In the Orient a new reign is often inaugurated by the construction of a mosque. Vast expense is incurred to make it as splendid as possible. But, once completed, it is never touched again. Others are built by succeeding sovereigns, but neither thought nor treasure is ever expended on the old ones. When they can no longer be used, they are abandoned, and fall into decay. The same system seems to prevail among our private owners and corporations. Streets are paved, lamp-posts erected, store-fronts carefully adorned, but from the hour the workman puts his finishing touch upon them they are

abandoned to the hand of fate. The mud may cake up knee-deep, wind and weather work their own sweet will, it is no one's business to interfere.

When abroad one of my amusements has been of an early morning to watch Paris making its toilet. The streets are taking a bath, liveried attendants are blacking the boots of the lamp-posts and newspaper-KIOSQUES, the shop-fronts are being shaved and having their hair curled, cafe's and restaurants are putting on clean shirts and tying their cravats smartly before their many mirrors. By the time the world is up and about, the whole city, smiling freshly from its matutinal tub, is ready to greet it gayly.

It is this attention to detail that gives to Continental cities their air of cheerfulness and thrift, and the utter lack of it that impresses foreigners so painfully on arriving at our shores.

It has been the fashion to laugh at the dude and his high collar, at the dandy, aping style and fashion. Better the dude, better the dandy, better even the Bowery "tough" with his affected carriage, for they at least are reaching blindly out after something better than their surroundings, striving after an ideal, and are in just so much the superiors of the foolish souls who mock them - better, even misguided efforts, than the ignoble stagnant quagmire of slouch into which we seem to be slowly descending.

Source:

Gutenberg Etext

December, 1995 [Etext #379]