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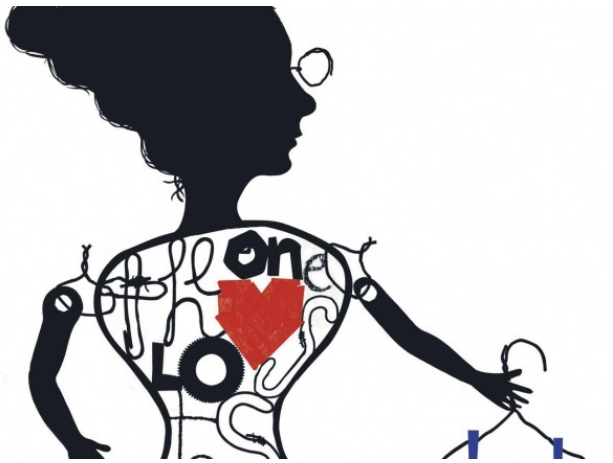
The Ideal English Major



Melinda Beck for The Chronicle Review

By Mark Edmundson | JULY 29, 2013

Soon college students all over America will be trundling to their advisers' offices to choose a majo In this moment of financial insecurity, students are naturally drawn tc economics, business, and the hard scienc But students ought to resist the temptatio of those purportedly money-ensuring options and even of history and philosophy, marvelous though they may be. All students—and I mean all—ought to think seriously about majoring in English. Becomi an English major means pursuing the most important subject of all—being a human being.

An English major is much more than 32 or 36 credits including a course in Shakespeare a course on writing before 1800, and a three-part survey of English and American lit. That's the outer form of the endeavor. It's what's inside that matters. It's the character-forming—or (dare I say?) soul-making—dimension of the pursuit that counts. And wha is that precisely? Who is the English major in his ideal form? What does the English major have, what does he want, and what does he in the long run hope to become?

The English major is, first of all, a reader. She's got a book pup-tented in front of her nose many hours a day; her Kindle glows softly late into the night. But there are reader and there are readers. There are people who read to anesthetize themselves—they reac to induce a vivid, continuous, and risk-free daydream. They read for the same reason that people grab a glass of chardonnay—to put a light buzz on. The English major read

because, as rich as the one life he has may be, one life is not enough. He reads not to se the world through the eyes of other people but effectively to become other people. Wha is it like to be John Milton, Jane Austen, Chinua Achebe? What is it like to be them at their best, at the top of their games?

English majors want the joy of seeing the world through the eyes of people who—let us admit it—are more sensitive, more articulate, shrewder, sharper, more alive than they themselves are. The experience of merging minds and hearts with Proust or James or Austen makes you see that there is more to the world than you had ever imagined. You see that life is bigger, sweeter, more tragic and intense—more alive with meaning than you had thought.

Real reading is reincarnation. There is no other way to put it. It is being born again into higher form of consciousness than we ourselves possess. When we walk the streets of Manhattan with Walt Whitman or contemplate our hopes for eternity with Emily Dickinson, we are reborn into more ample and generous minds. "Life piled on life / Were all too little," says Tennyson's "Ulysses," and he is right. Given the ragged magnificence of the world, who would wish to live only once? The English major lives many times through the astounding transportive magic of words and the welcoming power of his receptive imagination. The economics major? In all probability he lives but once. If the English major has enough energy and openness of heart, he lives not once but hundreds of times. Not all books are worth being reincarnated into, to be sure—but those that are win Keats's sweet phrase: "a joy forever."

The economics major lives in facts and graphs and diagrams and projections. Fair enough. But the English major lives elsewhere. Remember the tale of that hoary patriarchal fish that David Foster Wallace made famous? The ancient swimmer swishes his slow bulk by a group of young carp suspended in the shallows. "How's the water?" the ancient asks. The carp keep their poise, like figures in a child's mobile, but say not a word. The old fish gone, one carp turns to another and says, "What the hell is water?"

The English major knows that the water we humans swim in is not any material entity.

Our native habitat is language, words, and the English major swims through them with the old fin's enlivening awareness. But all of us, as the carp's remark suggests, live in a different relation to language. I'll put it a little tendentiously: Some of us speak, others are spoken. "Language speaks man," Heidegger famously said. To which I want to repl Not all men, not all women: not by a long shot. Did language speak Shakespeare? Did language speak Spenser? Milton, Chaucer, Woolf, Emerson? No, not even close.

What does it mean to be spoken by language? It means to be a vehicle for expression a not a shaper of words. It means to rely on clichés and preformulated expressions. It means to be a channeler, of ad-speak, sports jargon, and the latest psychological babbl You sound not like a living man or a woman but like something much closer to a machine, trying to pass for human. You never know how you feel or what you want in l because the words at your disposal are someone else's and don't represent who you ar and what you want. You don't and can't know yourself. You don't and can't know the world.

The businessman prattles about excellence, leadership, partnerships, and productivity The athlete drones on about the game plan, the coach, one play at a time, and the inestimable blessing of having teammates who make it all possible. The politician pontificates about unity, opportunity, national greatness, and what's in it for the midd class. When such people talk, they are not so much human beings as tape loops.

The essayist John Jeremiah Sullivan catches this sort of sensibility in its extreme form i an essay about reality TV shows. There, verbal channeling reaches an almost unimaginable degree of intensity: "big mouths spewing fantastic catchphrase fountain of impenetrable self-justification." Yeah, that's about it.

The English major at her best isn't used by language; she uses it. She bends it, inflects it with irony, and lets hyperbole bloom like a firework flower when th time's right. She knows that language isn't there merely to represent the worl but to interpret it. Language lets her say how she feels.

The English major believes in talk and writing and knows that any worthwhile event in

life requires commentary and analysis in giant proportion. She believes that the uncommented-on life is not worth living. Then, of course, there is the commentary on the comments. There must be, as Eliot says, a hundred visions and revisions before the taking of the toast and tea—and a few after as well.

But I sometimes think that the English major's most habitual feeling about the linguist solution in which she swims isn't practical at all. What she feels about language most o the time is wonder and gratitude. For language is a stupendous gift. It's been bequeathed to us by all of the foregoing generations. It is the creation of great souls like Shakespeare and Chaucer to be sure. But language is also the creation of salesmen and jive talkers, quacks and mountebanks, hookers and heroic warriors. We spend our lives knowingly or not, trying to say something impeccably. We long to put the best words in the best order. (That, Coleridge said, is all that poetry really comes down to.) And when we do, we are on the lip of adding something to the language. We've perhaps made a contribution, however small, to what the critic R.P. Blackmur called the stock of available reality. And when we do, we've lived for a moment with the immortals. Poetry has been called the Olympics of language.

I love Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Donne. But I like it when a fellow pickup b-ba player points to a nervous guy skittering off to the bathroom just as the game's about to start: "He's taking a chicken pee." Yup—hit it on the head. I like it when, in the incomparable song "Juicy," Biggie Smalls describes coming up in life by letting us know that once "Birthdays was the worst days / Now we sip champagne when we thirs-tay." (And to advertise his sudden erotic ascent: "Honeys play me close like butter play toast.")

Language, a great poem in and of itself, is all around us. We live in the lap of enormous wonder, but how rarely do most of us look up and smile in gratitude and pleasure? The English major does that all the time.

The English major: in love with language and in love with life—or at least hungry for as much life as he can hold. But there's something else, too. The English major immerses

himself in books and revels in language for a purpose. You might even call it a high purpose, if you're disposed to such talk. (I sometimes am.)

The English major wants to use what he knows about language and what he's learning from books as a way to confront the hardest of questions. He uses these things to try to figure out how to live. His life is an open-ended work in progress, and it's never quite done, at least until he is. For to the English major, the questions of life are never closed There's always another book to read; there's always another perspective to add. He might think that he knows what's what as to love and marriage and the raising of children. But he's never quite sure. He takes tips from the wise and the almost wise tha he confronts in books and sometimes (if he's lucky) in life. He measures them and sifts them and brings them to the court of his own experience. (There is a creative reading a well as a creative writing, Emerson said.)

He's always ready to change his mind. Darwin on nature, or Wordsworth? Freud on lov or Percy Bysshe Shelley? Blake on sex, or Arthur Schopenhauer? Or perhaps none of the above. He doesn't give up his view easily, but it's nonetheless always up for debate and open for change. He's an unfinished guy, she's an unfinished woman. Which can be embarrassing and discomfiting from time to time, when he's with the knowing ones, th certain ones: those who are, often in all too many ways, finished.

Love for language, hunger for life, openness and a quest for truth: Those are the qualiti of my English major in the ideal form. But of course now we're talking about more thar mere academic major. We're talking about a way of life. We're talking about a way of living that places inquiry into how to live in the world—what to be, how to act, how to move through time—at its center.

What we're talking about is a path to becoming a human being, or at least a better sort human being than one was at the start. An English major? To me an English major is someone who has decided, against all kinds of pious, prudent advice and all kinds of fears and resistances, to major, quite simply, in becoming a person. Once you've passe that particular course of study—or at least made some significant progress on your

way—then maybe you're ready to take up something else.

Mark Edmundson is a professor of English at the University of Virginia. This essay is adapted from his latest book, Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education, to be published this month by Bloomsbury USA.