

The Crux of *Jane Eyre* Is Moral Integrity: A Tale of the 1950s · *Thomas H. Rogers*

THERE WAS SOMETHING dismal from the very beginning, before the lodger came, before we had even rented the house. The real estate man remarked, “This street is slated to be repaved,” as he parked at the curb, and later, when my wife asked about children in the neighborhood—we were expecting a child then—the man pointed to a twisted, oddly dead-looking tricycle apparently abandoned on the parking strip half a block away.

Then we moved and had a miscarriage and acquired our lodger all simultaneously. Or seemingly so. Mary had these terrific pains and I sent her in a taxi to the hospital because my driver’s license had expired. I went on packing books, which is the one practical thing I can do really well. Sumner called up from the hospital to say that Mary had had a miscarriage, which I had expected all along and had been thinking about while I packed the books because I’m not inhuman after all. Then Sumner said that we’d have this extra bedroom, which was to have been the child’s, and why shouldn’t he rent it from us? It seemed crass, I thought, to bring up something like that so soon after we’d practically had a death in the family even if it was only three months. Still I couldn’t mention the fact because Sumner had gone with Mary while I’d packed books, so I merely said we’d have to think about it. But as Mary said, we had a lease and why not a paying guest? Why not indeed?

“There’s my position to be thought of,” I told her. “After all, here I am an Assistant Professor. I can’t be having a houseful of graduate students. What would people think?”

“They’d think nothing,” she said. “Besides Sumner’s an Instructor even if his thesis isn’t finished.”

My position was and is that a man remains a graduate student until his thesis is finished. “A finished thesis separates the men from the boys,” I said.

“Well,” said Mary, “we need the money.”

So Sumner moved into the new house at the same time we did, in fact slightly before we did, because he had fewer things to move. And when

we arrived, there he was in the best bedroom screwing his tie rack onto the back of the closet door. I told him Mary and I were planning to use that room.

“Oh,” he said, “I thought you two would probably want the room that looks into the back yard.”

“No, we want this one,” I said. It had a door to the bathroom, and besides it was twice as large as the one at the back. Anyway I saw that bluntness was necessary or there would be one of those long discussions with everyone conceding everything to everyone else and we’d end up with the room empty. The house wasn’t really big enough so that we could afford to have a guest room with a curse on it. That was the beginning.

Sumner and I had gone to graduate school together. In fact Mary had gone with us—to Columbia. In fact, I met Sumner through her. He had turned up one night when Mary and I were listening to records and told me all about a novel he’d just finished reading. It was by Fanny Burney, and I’d already read it. But that was how I met Sumner.

I married Mary and Sumner continued to turn up in the evening. He and I used to play chess together, and then we had this card game that we all played, called *pounce*, which I liked very much and so did Sumner. Mary didn’t like it so very much, but then she had no reason to, because she always beat us. It’s a hard game to describe, but each of you has a deck of cards and you all sit on the floor and play like mad and the first one finished shouts “Pounce.” Mary was always saying “Pounce” in her quiet voice, and Sumner and I would be left with a pile of cards.

And of course we were studying the same things. After I married Mary, she stopped registering for courses, but Sumner and I had classes together and we even studied for our comprehensives and took them the same summer when we found that all the Old English boys were out of residence. Then I worked like hell on my thesis while Sumner kept dropping in wanting to play chess or pounce or go to the movies, and generally I suggested that he and Mary just *go* and let me work. The result of all this was that I got my thesis done while Sumner was still doing research, though that expresses it too forcibly. Taking notes, maybe *gathering* notes best describes it.

Finally, and this is the major fact that explains the situation I started out by describing, we both got offers from Nebraska U.

That was the year the MLA meetings were held in Philadelphia. The

year there were three different new readings of the “Immortality Ode.” And at the MLA, aside from learning how to read the “Immortality Ode,” you get to meet heads of departments who need new young men. Sumner and I both made a good impression on Professor Ericson from Nebraska, not, I insist, because we’re so similar, but because Ericson had—has—a soft spot in his heart/head for young men trained in up-to-date graduate schools, which Columbia certainly is. Frankly, he thought he was strengthening his department by hiring us. He was—is—that sort. A nice man.

Now I won’t deny that an offer from Nebraska is less resounding than an offer from Harvard or Berkeley, but it was a job, the pay looked good, and I at least was offered an Assistant Professorship. They offered Sumner an Instructorship because his thesis wasn’t finished. He had decided that he’d get more work done on his thesis by going away from New York—and where was farther than Nebraska?

So all of us arrived out here in Nebraska where none of us had ever been, and that is the beginning of this story. Or almost the beginning, because to explain why we were moving so soon after our arrival involves going back to the fact that Mary and I have always been uneasy about ending up as one of those brittle childless couples you hear about. But on the other hand neither of us could quite face the idea of a child in the morning—I mean waking up in the morning and having a child around to talk to and to feed and so forth. But once we were out in Nebraska and I was an Assistant Professor, it seemed that we should have a child then or never, so we began.

It was a lot easier than I’d expected. After three years I’d begun to think that contraceptives couldn’t be that fool proof, but they are, or ours were, and the next thing we knew we were going to have a child. So we did the right thing by it from the start. We hunted around and rented this house, and got ready to move out of our apartment, and then all the things I have already mentioned happened and we ended up without the child but with Sumner.

Any furtive relief I may have felt was easily counterbalanced by the sight of Sumner screwing his tie rack onto the back of my closet door, and even after we’d gotten him into the baby’s room, I still wasn’t happy.

“Have you thought this out?” I asked Mary. “Will Sumner eat with us?”

Actually Mary still wasn't feeling so hot from losing the baby, and I knew she was sorrier about it than I was, even if she didn't admit it. Anyway, she said the arrangement would work out, and I didn't have the heart to ask "what arrangement?" There wasn't any yet since we were still moving in. Instead I put up my tie rack, using the holes Sumner had already made, and then I went downstairs to start unpacking my books. I decided that this time I'd arrange them by period instead of size. In the apartment we'd been in I'd had them arranged by size, and in New York I'd tried many different schemes. Sometimes I'd have them by genre—all the plays together and the novels together and so on but then the Works of men like Fielding who wrote plays and poems and novels got all over the place and what do you do with Carlyle? There's no really good way of arranging books, but I thought I'd try periods again. At least Fielding would be all on one shelf for a change.

I make it sound like a lot of work, but I love to arrange my books, and I was doing it very well, and having a good time, when I realized it was dark and there was nothing going on in the kitchen or anywhere.

This house we had moved into was decorated—done—finished—perhaps exhausted is the word I want, with dark woodwork and what seemed like acres of linoleum. There was linoleum all over the kitchen and dining-room, and in the bathroom, and even in Sumner's bedroom. Then there were our boxes, and the bookshelves and books. When I realized the house was dead except for me putting away my books, I felt depressed. I mean you can't enjoy any kind of work involved in moving into a new house unless you hear sounds of everyone else putting his shoulder to the wheel, so to speak. Besides, it was time for supper.

Mary was lying on the bed in our room, with no light on, but from the hall I could see she wasn't looking good. The doctor had told her to take it easy, which moving isn't exactly, except we'd had to get out of the apartment or pay rent for another month. So we moved. It was hardly my fault, but I felt guilty enough about it to offer to fix Mary some consomme and toast, which she agreed to. I set off downstairs, but not before checking down the hall just to see what Sumner was doing.

He'd gotten his room all fixed up, even to the point of taking down the pictures that had been in there and putting up some of our own, including my favorite print of Bombois' circus scene. He had all his books in his bookcase, and I suppose his tie rack was finally in place. He was sitting in

what looked like a comfortable chair that I remembered having seen in the living room when we looked at the house, and he was reading Bulwer-Lytton. Reading Bulwer-Lytton—Lord Bulwer-Lytton he always called him—constituted what Sumner, he thought wittily, called ‘preparation for research.’ His thesis was to be on George Moore, and his idea of preparation was to read every 19th-century novel.

When I stuck my head into his room he looked up.

“Hello,” he said, “time for dinner?”

Sumner did not like to eat alone. When he had heard my resume of the situation he decided that consomme and toast would do for him too, and in spite of my suggestion that he go out, he followed me downstairs to the kitchen. On the way down he tried to charm me by retailing the plot of *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

Sumner sat at the kitchen table talking while I sorted things out and found the consomme. I started to heat it and then to hunt for the toaster. Sumner finished briefing me on the Last Days up to the point he had reached.

“I’ve seen the movie,” I said. “Shall I tell you how it ends?”

“Bulwer-Lytton is more hateful even than George Moore,” Sumner said, “though in a different way of course.”

“Make a note of that before you forget it,” I suggested. “It’s the sort of aperçu you’ll find useful when you begin writing.”

Sumner didn’t like that. He got up remarking that he was just in my way and went back upstairs. I fixed the consomme and some toast for Mary and then scrambled eggs for myself. On my way through the dining room I noticed a picture of a cow standing hocks deep in grass and I thought to myself with a rush of primitive religious emotion, “I am that cow.” I served Mary on a painted tray I had found in the kitchen, and we were eating together in the bedroom when Sumner came in and sat down on the side of the bed too. He picked up a spoon and took a mouthful of my eggs. “No sherry?” he asked.

That was how the arrangement started working out.

Mary got to feeling better in a day or two and straightened up the kitchen and cooked, but either she didn’t have the heart to tell Sumner to get his own meals or else she liked cooking for him. I didn’t know which and didn’t want to ask. I was afraid she’d say that taking care of Sumner was like having a baby, which was dreadfully true but something I couldn’t bear to hear.

Though we had known Sumner for years and seen him daily most of that time, we'd seen him only in the afternoons and evenings. I wasn't prepared, except imaginatively, for the sight of Sumner eating breakfast. Being the junior members of the staff, Sumner and I had gotten 8:30 Freshman Comp sections. This was hard on me because I wake up slowly and late by preference, but, if there was any consolation in the fact, it seemed to be harder on Sumner than on me. I discovered there was no consolation.

He would come downstairs at about a quarter to eight in his dressing gown with his underwear on underneath, but still unshaven. And he'd be clearing his throat. He smokes more than I do and drinks less water I guess, so clearing his throat in the morning takes some time, added to which he lights a cigarette the first thing on getting really awake so he coughs half the time which produces a kind of incipient vomiting noise.

Then, in this zombie state, half retching, half choking, he begins to eat breakfast, which for him consists of coffee, milk, orange juice, water, lemonade if there is any left over from the night before, and two bananas "for solids." I think he takes his coffee black to avoid having to manipulate a spoon. Bananas of course are easy to peel with one's fingers. Also he always reached for the middle section of the paper which I save to read over coffee when Walter Lippmann seems really at his best.

I mean I'm not sociable over breakfast myself, who is, but Sumner seemed to have explored or perhaps invented new heights of offensiveness. He would just sit behind his paper with his circle of glasses around the outside edge, reaching out for one of them from time to time and sipping, coughing, hacking, smoking and sometimes blowing his nose. I found myself talking to Mary more than I'd ever done before, just as a defense against Sumner.

Then at a quarter after eight he'd stumble upstairs and come down, dressed in five minutes still clearing his throat and smoking his fourth cigarette of the day. Still unshaven too. Luckily he has a fair beard that doesn't show much even on the second day, so he could get by with it.

And then we would drive to the U., together in body only.

Sumner would get another cigarette lit before 8:30, which he would have to put out because the janitors are very strict, and then I'd see him walk into room 120 to face his class, while I went further down the hall to room 124. It didn't seem that Sumner's classes were going so well; I knew

that without being told since I could see that he didn't read his students' themes and didn't even have a gradebook to record the grades in. I don't know, perhaps his students didn't mind; at least he didn't criticize them whereas I had gotten the feeling my own students were tiring of "dull," "awkward," " cliché," and "wordy" which I embroidered on their papers. Still I couldn't help being depressed by the thought of Sumner's delinquencies. At the end of the semester there would be a mess, and the close association between Sumner and myself might extend his disgrace to me. My position wasn't any too secure to stand rocking by Sumner. Besides I could sense a sinking ship when I lived with it, and I didn't want it to go down through my floor, as it were. If Sumner had been intellectually incompetent that would be different, but behavioral disorders contain a guilt by association sting.

Not, actually, that the department was such a judging and competitive place. As I've said, Ericson is a very nice man and the others have their good points. In fact—and this adds to the total picture—Sumner made a rather good impression on our colleagues. One met and chatted with them in the afternoon, and by then Sumner would have himself in hand, and be full of bright things and good precise gossip about editors and editions. But some day our colleagues would have to revise their estimate of him, and I wasn't looking forward to that.

And, of course, most of all I wasn't happy living with the guy. I think there are some people whose body heat stays steady during the day, and some whose body heat sort of vacillates. Mine does for instance; I like a nap in the afternoon, but Sumner's body heat, from a spectacular low in the morning, seemed to rise throughout the day. By midnight he was hotter than a fire cracker, wanting to play pounce or chess or go for walks or drives or whatever. Living with him was all, indeed rather more than all, I had envisioned.

Yet I felt there must be some middle ground of unpleasantness between telling him to get out and letting him stay. I took Mary out to dinner to keep her from cooking for Sumner. The second time he joined us, so I began getting up earlier and reading the papers in the living room while Sumner breakfasted, but he read yesterday's newspaper without apparently noticing the difference. I had him help me with the storm windows, but he jammed or pretended to jam his thumb on the first one, and retired in injured triumph. I even locked the bathroom door one night to prevent

him from taking his 2:00 A.M. bath, and if I felt foolish doing this, I reflected that it was in the good cause. Especially after he woke us up to explain that the bathroom door to the hall was locked and could he use our door, or would one of us get up to unlock the other?

Still and all, I knew what my best grounds were and I stuck mainly to them.

“Have you gotten our themes graded, Mr. Hofstra?” I would ask in the morning as he choked and coughed over his beverages. At dinners when he was himself and not the opaque wreck of a quarter to eight, I would put the knife in more delicately. Sumner would be telling us the plot of the latest Bulwer-Lytton sensation and I would pretend interest, discuss it, and finally suggest there were affinities to *Esther Waters*. He never found that funny. And whenever I came across references to George Moore in my own reading I would draw Sumner’s attention to them. I even took to reading George Moore and would leave copies of *Ave Atque Vale* lying around, open. I suppose it should be mentioned that Sumner’s preparation for research did not include reading Moore, whom he’d begun to hate as soon as his thesis topic had been approved.

Then Mary intervened.

“Leave him alone,” she said, “you’re just being mean.”

I didn’t get her point. “Why not be mean?” I asked.

“He’s already insecure,” she explained, deepening the mystery as far as I was concerned.

You see there were some things about this situation that needed clarification. I could understand that from Mary’s point of view there were compensations for Sumner. After all, I talked to her now in the morning, and I took her out to dinner, and I had put up the storm windows without too much urging. Still and all, I did not see how she, as a woman of taste and sensibility, could stand him. Not only did the day begin with his breakfast routine and end with his bath at 2:00 which invariably woke her up, but there were the intermediate hours when Sumner wasn’t at the University. I reflected that it could not be pleasant for her to watch him fight with me for the couch after dinner, or listen to the two of us mimic our students, or hear us bicker over chess games and pounce games and argue about which channel of TV to watch. I expected her to feel that her home was being broken up by Sumner.

Yet, she didn’t seem to feel this, and the explanation perhaps takes me

into the more intimate territory of our relationship. You needn't worry that I shall reveal furtive passions, or regrets for lost opportunities. If Mary had ever been in love with Sumner that was over, and certainly living with him would do nothing to revive her feelings. I felt perfectly secure on that point. No, the explanation that gradually came to me was that Mary wanted a baby. We had been warned by the doctor not to start another one right away, which struck me at the time as a perfectly reasonable thing. But now it occurred to me that Mary had been hard hit not only by the delay, but by the fear of another accident. She began going to bed earlier. She drank more milk and less coffee. She was preparing for the next baby, while I had regarded the last one as an experiment that failed and might, or perhaps better yet, might not be tried again.

The point of this is that I suddenly saw that by contrast with Sumner, I appeared responsible and even mature. That was perhaps why Mary wanted him around—to reassure her that I was truly material out of which a father might be made. It was one of those insights that brings one up and makes one think of the future.

When I had first married her, Mary had been willing to lead the good graduate school life. She worked in the library, I went to classes, and she was satisfied that I had no grounds of protest about meals out of cans. We liked the same games and movies, and had read the same books. It sounds cold-blooded but actually we were in love.

When I said a moment ago that I was brought up and made to think of my future, I meant that I suddenly saw myself through Mary's eyes—a Professor of English, at Nebraska, aging slowly amid student themes and faculty lunches and the patter of little feet at home. That was to be it, I saw, unless I too went in the grand housecleaning that was to accompany the exposure of Sumner. This realization sharpened my dilemma, for it seemed to involve my fate with Sumner's. If he were to go without me, then I would be left alone in this shaping crucible represented by my wife and the university. Yet if he stayed I could sense a daily change in my personality as my dislike of Sumner led me to emphasize the differences between us. Already I noted a greater conscientiousness towards my work. And if we went together . . . but I could not for a moment face that alternative; to be swept back to New York, with Sumner, on the tides of academic failure was too awful to contemplate. When I had gotten this far in my thinking, it even occurred to me that a sort of compromise was repre-

sented by keeping Sumner in the baby's room in order to keep a baby out.

I was dazzled by my clear thinking.

Such was the situation when the first semester began to drag toward its grisly end in an outburst of head colds and final examinations. Sumner, deserting Bulwer-Lytton, was on a jag of reading Ouida, whom he pretended to like. His cold was easily the most spectacular one in the department and Ericson, who I cannot say often enough is really a good man, suggested that Sumner stick to his bed for a few days. We lumped Sumner's 8:30 section with mine, Robbins took over his 9:30 section, and Ericson himself took in the 11:30 Sophomore Lit students, so sadly deprived of their luminary at the last moment. I was to bring Sumner the papers to grade.

At home, in bed, waited upon by Mary, Sumner made good progress with Ouida, and regularly used up a box of Kleenex a day. To him there one day I brought a foot thick stack of exams to be graded. "How are they?" he asked as though inquiring about the taste of some oysters. "Open them and find out," I said. I had my own cold and my own exams; I left him to extract such pearls of his own wisdom as his students had retained.

It is too banal to say that from the start I saw Sumner would never grade his papers in time—I had foreseen that fact from the immemorial far away when we had first arrived at Nebraska together. Yet all my efforts were concentrated towards preventing Mary or anyone else from suggesting that I might give Sumner a hand. After dinner that night, with much show of suffering dejection, I took 15 grains of aspirin and started on my English themes. I sneezed regularly and called for cups of tea throughout the evening. I scattered the papers around the living room to suggest the illimitable quagmire of my situation. Mary had to approach me across a carpet strewn with Freshman essays. Yet such was the effect of this concentration that by midnight I was half done with them, and by noon the next day when I got up from bed, I had finished. The papers, extricably involved in the sheets and blankets—I had graded in bed that morning—crackled as I wearily rolled out and went to take a hot bath. Yet in the bathroom, thinking of the Sophomore Lit papers I still had to do, I managed to recover an outraged sense of being put-upon. They would take forever.

After my bath I checked in with Sumner. His stack of exams was un-

touched except for the topmost one which, propped up with three pillows, he was reading. He was holding it upside down. "I can't keep my attention on it anyway else," he remarked.

I left him, had lunch, and in a blaze of martyred sublimity finished off my lit papers by eight o'clock. Of course it would be days before I recovered. One student, for instance, had been day dreaming when I described the structure of the heroic couplet. He wrote: "In the 18th century, the heroic couple had five feet and rhymed. Its middle was marked by a caesarian and its end was stopped." The mind boggles.

It was hard to disguise my achievement from Mary, who in picking the papers up in the living room, and getting them out of the bed when she made it, had discovered grades on all of them. "Well," she remarked, "you haven't got anything to do now until Thursday."

"I'll have to calculate the Freshman grades," I said. That involved fractions for each weekly theme, and I confidently expected to take at least twenty-four hours for the whole business. I finished by ten o'clock. Sumner was reading Ouida when I checked with him. Two exams rested idly on the floor beside his bed.

The next morning I got out of the house early with my papers and grades. Ericson, when he saw them, nodded gravely. "How's Hofstra?" he asked.

"Much better," I said.

"Well enough to work?"

I couldn't have been more positive as I assured him he was.

That afternoon I lounged around the house. The new semester wouldn't begin for another eight days. Upstairs I knew Sumner was still blowing his nose and reading his themes upside down, and taking three hours off between each one to get on with Ouida. If I hadn't already known it, Mary would have cleared up any doubts I had. "He'll never finish," she told me.

I told her I knew it.

"Couldn't you help, at least with the lit papers?" she asked.

I shook my head.

I knew we were at the crossroads; I wondered if Mary realized it too. Was she so willing that I symbolically adopt Sumner? I couldn't believe it. From her point of view, how could Sumner compensate for the children we wouldn't have, for surely she wasn't expecting me to take care of both

Sumner and a child? I didn't mention this, of course, since I didn't want to suggest there were any bargains involved in my refusal to help Sumner. Let her figure that out if she could—we would argue about it later.

Anyhow, it occurred to me that the one way the situation might be saved and all decisions postponed, would be for Sumner to finish his papers on time. I suddenly wanted his help in shouldering the burden of responsibility around the house, and it seemed only fair that he begin by doing his own job. So I went upstairs to see what was what. I found Sumner reading Ouida upside down—"The only way I can keep my mind on *her* now"—but I insist that this was not decisive in my attitude. I was still approaching him with better feelings than I'd had in two months.

He had shown enough activity to mess up the pile of exams, which was encouraging, except that I realized the probable purpose was to make it hard to tell just how little work he had done. I picked up one of the exams at random—written by a Miss McClellan whose note taking, I remembered, had made Sumner feel uneasy. "She's a tricoteuse," he'd said once. She was in his Soph Lit class, and she wrote in violet ink in a kind of Carolingian minuscule adapted to 20th century needs. It was an impressive handwriting. I flipped through the paper until my eye was arrested at the top of the page. "The crux of *Jane Eyre*," the question read, "is moral integrity; in *Wuthering Heights* the characters are unaware of moral issues. Discuss." Miss McClellan had tackled this proposition by observing that: "Emily is to Charlotte Bronte as an eagle is to an owl." I suddenly had a feeling that maybe I *ought* to read these papers. "*Wuthering Heights*," Miss McClellan wrote, "is not so much a novel as a Platonic dialogue in which passion is substituted for reason, whereas *Jane Eyre* is a feminist tract in which impulse and logic are at war with morality." It went on and on like that. "What Emily did not want to know, Charlotte knew and feared." I felt I was getting, unspoiled by ripening or maturation or even comprehension, the fruits of Sumner's teaching.

I turned back a few pages. Miss McClellan zeroed in on Pope with this sentence: "There is nothing rude about Pope's greatness nor dark about his wisdom. He is thus a living refutation of his own best known lines."

Sumner was paying no attention to me, but when I put down the paper he asked, casually, how Miss McClellan seemed to have done? "Very well," I said, picking up some more of his lit papers.

"One so hates to have one's own words come back in garbled form," he remarked.

“The pain is exquisite, I know. Maybe I ought to just help you with these.”

“If you want to,” he allowed.

So I gathered up Sumner’s lit exams and took them downstairs. The decision had been made for me, and the budding plan in my mind robbed it of any aura of responsibility. Mary smiled when she saw what I had in my hands.

I read till 1:00. Mary went up to bed around midnight, after kissing me on the cheek. I hardly looked up; I was fascinated. With only a few exceptions Sumner’s students had picked up a jeweled, allusive, incomprehensible style of criticism whose source I knew was even now upstairs in bed swilling Ouida and tea. The few students who had either stood out against or been too confused to pick up Sumner’s style were also, it was sad to discover, rather dull-witted. Still I gave them Ds and failed all the rest.

The next morning around eleven I checked with Sumner. He had done perhaps a dozen Freshman essays; the deadline was noon the next day.

“Well,” I said cheerfully, “I finished the lit. papers for you.”

Sumner appeared genuinely grateful for a moment.

“Thanks.”

“How are you getting on with these?” I asked.

“Pretty well.” He blew his nose in a show of heroic pathos.

What I wanted from him at the moment was his class list so I could fill in the grades I had given his students without his knowing what I had done. My purpose, to be frank, was to provide the English Department with clear-cut evidence of Sumner’s intellectual incompetence. It was the one failure of his that certainly would do nothing to incriminate me, and the one, I felt, that was somehow the most fitting for him to go out on.

Of course the Department would scrutinize his grade lists and protest, but by the time the truth came out someone would certainly have read a few sample papers. I could just see Robbins, our Renaissance man, reading a sentence I remembered vividly: “Is it not too obvious to say that Hamlet both loves and hates his mother? Is there not also a large measure of boredom in his treatment of her?” I felt that alone should earn Sumner a return trip to NYC. So what if it was a teaching accomplishment of considerable magnitude to get good Nebraska youth to write such precious nonsense? In any reasonable argument I could justify the grades I had given.

I do not wish to explain how I squared my action with all the complexities of responsibility and irresponsibility that Sumner's presence invoked. Suffice it to say that I was suddenly so fed up with him, that I was willing to get him out of my house at any price, whether it meant a relapse into childishness for me, or a step towards paternity. I was prepared for anything but another five months of Sumner.

It was not hard to get his class lists from him, or rather to get the permission to fill in his grades. Actually it was quite a job sorting through his unopened mail from the University in order to find the list, but find it I did, and fill it out I did. Sumner seemed genuinely pleased, which was an irony I must confess to relishing.

Meanwhile I should point out that another and uglier crisis was fast approaching him. It was midafternoon of Wednesday and his Freshman grades were due at noon the next day. Even though he had lost interest in Ouida, and had acquired some facility in reading upside down, he was still making snail's progress toward inevitable disaster. And whether or not he finished he would never be able to compute all the fractional weekly grades, so his work seemed hardly important. With the evidence I had prepared, he was done for anyway. I was making ready to suggest to him that he simply assign the Freshmen their final grade on the basis of hunches and let it go at that. I suspected, in fact, that he was himself making ready for the same decision.

My surmise was entirely accurate, and as if to remove any last twinge of compunction I may have felt, Sumner decided to leave his sick bed and go to the U. on Thursday morning in order to present his grades himself. I suppose he thought the sight of his suffering dutifulness would do him good with the English Department. I let him go, knowing he would never bother to look inside the envelope in which I had sealed his lit papers and grades. I was right, too, since he came back pleased with himself, remarking that his cold was almost gone.

Later that afternoon, then, I was not taken by surprise when Ericson called up and asked to speak to Hofstra.

It was odd, though, that when it came to the grand moment, I could not bear to hear Sumner's half of the conversation. I went upstairs to take my afternoon nap, only to be interrupted a scant ten minutes later by Sumner coming up to say that Ericson wanted to talk to me.

I searched Sumner's face for signs, but none were there.

I cannot pretend that the next few minutes were pleasant for me. Though one could hardly say I had betrayed Sumner, I felt one *could* point out that Nietzsche's dictum — "When you see a man stumbling, push" — hardly applies in everyday life and between, well, old friends.

To say nothing of the fact that Ericson's anger, when I got to the phone, seemed directed toward me.

"Have you read the papers?" I asked. But he wouldn't listen.

He wanted me to come over to his office to discuss the situation and there was nothing to do but go.

How many times have I said that Ericson is a good man? I don't remember, but I must repeat it now: he is a good man. Through that whole interview his goodness was sustained, despite the trials that I began to see were besetting him. His anger had evaporated by the time I got to him, and he met me by saying, "Take off your coat, Orroway, we must regrade these papers."

"But, sir, I've graded them," I said. "That's what they're worth."

"Nonsense," he said, "this is witty, listen," and I saw him pick up a paper covered with the dreadfully familiar Carolingian minuscule which had entrapped me in this whole mess. Ericson read: "Poe is Pope without the pee." I couldn't quarrel with his sense of humor, so I protested that it didn't mean anything.

"Well, how many student papers do?" he asked. "Now we must make distinctions between these."

So we spent the next hours rereading Sumner's papers. Ericson set the ground rules by remarking at the beginning, "About 10% As will be right." We settled down in shirtsleeved intimacy. Once or twice Ericson read me a particularly *récherché* line: "The smutty sensuousness of Tennyson."

"Seems to have been an unusual class," he remarked more to himself than to me.

It was dark by five o'clock, but we worked on under the lights. When we were done, Ericson said, "Now come and have dinner with me. I want to talk to you." I called up Mary and told her what I was doing.

"Sumner is feeling better," she said, "he wants to see a movie."

"Well *go* then," I said.

Ericson watched me as I hung up the receiver.

"Family trouble?" he remarked, and without waiting for an answer he

got me into his car and drove to the good restaurant in town.

“Now, Orroway,” he said, “you mustn’t think I’m being too personal, but I understand a lot more than you think I do.”

“Yes, sir?” I said.

“Now I should tell you that from the beginning we’ve been very pleased with you. We think you’re a very promising young man, quite an asset to the department. And Hofstra too.”

“Sir!” I protested.

“Yes, Hofstra is promising,” said Ericson. “Of course things will be better when he gets his thesis done, and gets a promotion and feels more secure.”

“But sir!”

“No,” said Ericson, “I understand this better than you think. It’s hard, of course, to make the transition that you and Hofstra are making this year. A graduate student is—well—subservient to his department, and a teacher has authority. The sudden transition is often unsettling to young men.”

I could see then that I had nothing to say to Ericson. He was just too good. I listened and ate while he talked about his own days in graduate school, and the jokes he had played, and the way he had felt about his professors. Those old, sad, tired, faded larks of his, those innocent irresponsibilities seemed as remote as the pleistocene, but I listened and admired his goodness. Then he came to his explanation of my grades for Hofstra’s students. It was a witty prank, I discovered, a sudden flare-up of the old graduate student Adam in me. I nodded intelligently, smiled at appropriate moments, and let him finish. And all the time I was reflecting that but for Ericson’s extraordinary and pure goodness I might have seriously damaged my future in the department. Sumner had been saved by the same sweetness of nature but I hardly cared, so overwhelmed was I by the sense of my own miraculous safety. It was exhausting.

“Well, sir,” I found myself saying, “I’m very glad you take it this way. You’ve been extraordinarily nice about it all.” I felt, for the moment, guilty as hell. It was bad enough to feel that Ericson believed in me, and it was worse to realize he still believed in Sumner, but I saw there was no hope of confessing. I could not say that at heart I was subversive; that contempt for my students, for my profession, even for education itself was the one force that kept me going. In fact it was so impossible to say, “You’re

all wrong,” that I seemed to be cut off from every response but the natural one.

I got home with a feeling of complete and utter desolation. Mary and Sumner were still at the movies, and so I wandered around the house by myself, without even having the heart to turn on the TV. There were dirty dishes in the kitchen which I washed and even dried. I thought about the coal supply, I thought about the course in the 18th-century novel I was to give the next semester. I went up to my study and started making notes for lectures. Also, I thought about Sumner at the movies, and wondered what he would say when he came back. Would he move out? After all, I mean, if he couldn't take the hint I had so nearly ruined myself in giving, what would move him? Then I saw it—nothing.

I looked up from my desk to the picture of the cow standing in grass. Mary had moved it from the dining room and we needed it to cover a discolored spot in the plaster in my study. “I am that cow,” I thought again.

The story is really over. I shall not go on with the details of how, that night, Mary and I jumped the gun on the doctor and began another baby, nor how I lived with Sumner for the next five months, from time to time assuming Mary's job of cooking for him as she felt more and more in need of rest. I cannot pretend that I ceased to bother Sumner. I bought a used twenty-five-cent copy of *Esther Waters* and inscribed it: “To Sumner with love. I enjoyed this book hugely, and think so great a reader as you will love it.” But all this didn't satisfy me as much as it once had, and I was damn busy with the teaching, and the new 18th-century novel course, and the cooking, and the coal, and in the spring getting the storm windows down, and the screens up. Should I say that Sumner was no help in all this?

In June, Sumner departed. He had a final, affecting interview with Ericson, who urged him to stay, but, as Sumner pointed out, it was most important right now for his career that he get back to Columbia where there were books to consult. I am virtually certain that at some point in that interview Sumner smiled boyishly and said, “You see, sir, I haven't gotten as much work done this year as I had hoped to.”

This winter he is in Europe on a Fulbright that came through at the last minute because someone else broke his back. I am now a father and, as Ericson keeps assuring me, doing very well in the Department. I have come to terms with authority, and when next you hear from me I shall be

an Associate Professor with a book out and maybe another child on the way. Quite one of the mainstays of the Department, a consolation to Ericson as he moves forward toward retirement. And who knows who will succeed him?