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The Way of Our Words

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ENG 210 - Section 66

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The Way of Our Words

Creative writing has come a long way since its advent. The ancient Mesopotamians invented writing in 3200 BC (Lannon 3). Originally developed to keep logs of the distribution of goods and services, writing slowly morphed into a way to record stories and poems. From there, the ancient Egyptians and Greeks used writing as a medium through which to spread art, knowledge, and messages. Creative writing blossomed with works like the 2400 BC Egyptian *Coffin Texts* and the 2100 BC *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Although the concept of using symbols to represent words and ideas was completely unheard of before the first millennium, humanity embraced the opportunity to create, compose, and articulate. As human culture progressed, creative writing only became more prevalent. People found that they could connect with each other through similar interests in books, and authors found that they could use their medium to share their views with the world. Over five thousand years after writing was invented, Isaac Asimov stated, "Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers" (Barbato et. al. 151). Throughout the history of writing, many authors have seemed to share Asimov's idea. Writing, particularly creative writing, has served humanity as a way to spark interests, stir hearts, draw attention to social issues, and influence civilizations. From novels and articles to songs and plays, creative writing has helped reflect and shape the direction of culture in our modern world.

William Shakespeare, arguably one of the most revered authors that ever lived, used his words in a way that people had never seen before. His influence was and is wide. He forged a

path for future writers to discuss intimacy with his unprecedented descriptions of human sexuality, and, according to Literary Cavalcade, fifteen moons are currently named after characters from Shakespearean plays (LC). However, the most notable way that Shakespeare's writing changed the world was the plethora of words he invented. In the thirty-seven plays and one-hundred and fifty-seven sonnets credited to him, William Shakespeare is generally believed to have invented over two thousand words (Mabillard 2).

Without Shakespeare, people would be forced to stomp around, get angry, and yell, without actually going on a "rant." Abraham Lincoln would have been brutally shot, but he would not have been "assassinated," and people that act morally superior to others would not be described as being "sanctimonious." Shakespeare made it possible for people to express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions in ways they never had before. This streamlined communication and augmented other writers' creative expression. Most of Shakespeare's neologisms, such as "employer," "reclusive," and "engagement," are still in use today, proving that his writing is still impacting our culture in a way that goes beyond providing mere entertainment. Although he may not have realized it at the time, William Shakespeare helped shape the direction the English language was taking, all the way from the 16th century to now.

The invention of new words is not the only way that creative writing has historically influenced human development. Written in 1959 and published in 1961, the nonfictional novel *Black Like Me* by John Griffin drew an enormous amount of attention to racism in the deep South, and sparked an interest in Americans of all ethnicities to the injustice being dealt to black Americans. In his scathing expose of southern prejudice, Griffin gave a detailed account of how he artificially darkened his skin and spent six weeks traveling through Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, posing as a black man. During his six weeks of masquerade, he

experienced racism of every kind. He was denied access to areas he had frequented as a white man, he was threatened with physical violence on multiple occasions, and he was forced to acknowledge the reality of the abuse heaped on the black southern community. When his narrative was published in 1961 under the title *Black Like Me*, Griffin was inundated with thousands of letters from shocked citizens who, for the first time, began to realize the absurdity of their racism. (Griffin 160).

It is impossible to calculate the exact effect Griffin's writing had on changing the way black people were treated in the 20th century, but this quote from his novel explains what he felt his work accomplished: "We were advocating only one thing: that this country rid itself of the racism that prevented some citizens from living as fully functioning men and as a result dehumanized all men... In spite of everything, however, those days of the early and mid-sixties were full of hope. The country seemed to be awakening to the depth of injustices suffered by black people." (Griffin 171 175) Griffin goes on to say that the late sixties were horrific; they were a period of pain and danger for black people and anti-racism activists. However, he acknowledges that the opposition they faced was only a problem because of society's changing views. Backlash occurred when the civil rights movement came into prominence, but only because civil rights advocates were able to reach such a large audience, which included the obstinate bigots in the country. Although John Griffin was certainly not the only author to advocate racial equality, his contribution to the civil rights movement is undeniable. Griffin is commonly applauded for his courage in entering unknown communities under his guise as a black man, but I think the real test of his courage was defying the societal expectations from fellow whites, publishing his account of the racism he experienced as a black man, and making the decision to earn the wrath of segregationists rather than be complacent about the racial

injustice he witnessed. His writing helped start riots, earned him death threats, and plunged him into over a decade of turmoil as he contributed to the civil rights movement, but most importantly, his writing sparked a change.

Griffin's writing may have had immediate, explosive consequences, but another famed 20th century writer busied himself with pursuing peace. John Lennon, a poet, hippie, peace activist, and musician of the sixties and seventies devoted himself to protesting the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Best known for his involvement in the musical group The Beatles, Lennon began to play piano, banjo, and guitar as a young child (Editors "John Lennon Biography"). As a seventeen year old in 1957, Lennon formed his first band, known as the Quarrymen. His fellow bandmates Paul McCartney and George Harrison, along with the eventual addition of Richard Starkey, formed The Beatles, the most commercially successful band of all time. (Mash) The Beatles disbanded in 1970, not long after Lennon's second marriage to Yoko Ono in 1969. Together with Ono, Lennon became known as an anti-war protestor and peace activist. Because he was such a well-known public figure, Lennon was able to use his influence in the entertainment world as the platform on which he preached a message of total love, peace, and acceptance. Lennon and Ono's first anti-war demonstration took place during their honeymoon in Amsterdam. The pair invited news reporters and photographers to spend the day with them as they reclined in their honeymoon bed. This went on for two weeks, during which Lennon and Ono led discussions about world peace. The world affectionately dubbed the newlywed's demonstration as the Bed-In, which Lennon and Ono repeated three months later in Montreal (Whitehead). These two events brought Lennon to the forefront of the rally against the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War. He made use of his creative talents and solidified himself as an anti-war figure with a song that came to be known as the unofficial

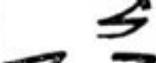
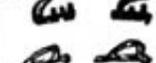
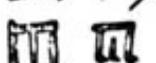
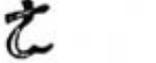
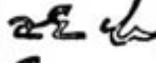
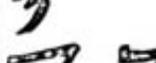
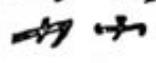
anthem of the peace movement: Give Peace A Chance. On November 15th of 1969, folk singer Pete Seeger led nearly half a million people who gathered on the Washington DC mall to protest the war in a powerful rendition of Give Peace A Chance (Wiener 1). Lennon later commented, “I saw pictures of that Washington demonstration on British TV, with all those people singing it, forever and not stopping. It was one of the biggest moments of my life” (Wiener 1). This moment inspired him to write another anthem, Imagine, and Lennon remained heavily involved in anti-war activism until his assassination in 1980 (Shields). As with the case of John Griffin, it is impossible to measure exactly how much Lennon’s words made a difference to the war. However, his poetic vision of a peaceful world with no societally constructed boundaries between people because of ethnicity, religion, regional borders, or wealth stirred the hearts of thousands of people. Lennon’s lyrics allowed anti-war protestors to unite with each other and use his songs as a chant that, together, made a bigger noise than any of them could have done individually. John Lennon may not have stopped the war, but he made it possible for like-minded, passionate people to band together and support a common cause. He analyzed the state of the world he was in and put forth his views in a way that appealed to as many people as possible, and he used his creative writing talents to do so.

Writing has always impacted humanity. When it was first invented, writing made it possible for people to manually record information for the first time. The ability to read and write was so valued that scribes quickly rose to the top tiers of the social hierarchy in their cultures. Writing was a way to distribute religious texts, issue declarations, and send personal messages. The ingenuity it must have taken for those original Mesopotamians to realize they could represent syllables with physical markings was only amplified when those same people used their new discovery to change the way humans interacted with one another. Although

different cultures developed different alphabets, the significance of being able to write was the same for all (see table 1).

Table 1

A chart of the differences in developmental alphabets.

| Values | EGYPTIAN | | SEMITIC | | LATER EQUIVALENTS. | | | |
|--------|--------------|---|---|---|---|-------|--------|---|
| | Hieroglyphic | Hieratic. | Phœnician | | Greek | Roman | Hebrew | |
| a | eagle |  |  |  | | A | A | א |
| b | crane |  |  |  | | B | B | ב |
| k (g) | throne |  |  |  |  | Γ | C | ג |
| t (d) | hand |  |  |  |  | Δ | D | ד |
| h | mæander |  |  |  | | E | E | ה |
| f | cerastes |  |  |  |  | Υ | F | ו |
| z | duck |  |  |  | | Ι | Z | ז |
| χ (kh) | sieve |  |  |  |  | H | H | ח |
| θ (th) | tongs |  |  |  |  | Θ | ... | ט |
| i | parallels |  |  |  | | I | I | י |
| k | bowl |  |  |  | | K | K | כ |
| l | lioness |  |  |  |  | Λ | L | ל |
| m | owl |  |  |  | | M | M | מ |
| n | water |  |  |  | | N | N | נ |
| s | chairback |  |  |  | | Ξ | X | ס |

Source: Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1995. 169. Print.

We take writing for granted now, because we have never lived in a world without it. Yet without writing, our culture would suffer. We would not be able to sing songs, because we wouldn't have them. We would be forced to learn socratically, because there would be no textbooks or novels. We would never enjoy a play or movie, we would not be able to communicate with people that were not right next to us, and we would never be able to entertain ourselves with a good book. Creative writing, whether it be in the form of a new word, a novel, or a lyric, is a way to unite people under a common goal. Creative writing helps connect people. It calls people to action. It helps people communicate effectively. From the birth of writing to the present day, creative writing has helped reflect and shape the way we live our lives.

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