



English 2333: The Commonplace Book

Dr. Monica Smith

A studious yong man may gather to himselfe good furniture both of words and approved phrases and to make to his use as it were a common place booke.

Thomas Cooper, Introduction, *Thesaurus* (1578)

Time was when readers kept commonplace books. Whenever they came across a pithy passage, they copied it into a notebook under an appropriate heading, adding observations made in the course of daily life. [. . .] It involved a special way of taking in the printed word. [. . .] They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality.

Robert Darnton, "Extraordinary Commonplaces"
The New York Review of Books (2000)

As the two quotations above suggest, a commonplace book is a collection of passages saved for future reference, so that the things we read—the thoughts that move us—will not disappear, unrecoverable, into the deep hole of our forgetfulness.

For this assignment, I am asking you to collect and reflect on passages from our course readings, both those in your English class as well as, occasionally, those from your theatre class. But more than just a static collection of quotes, our commonplace book will become a reflection of the different ways we read these texts, the variety of approaches we all bring to the table. All of your commonplace book entries will be posted on WTCClass; thus we as a community will be able to share our thoughts and reactions and learn from one another.

For each entry, you should first include the *entire quotation*, identifying the author and work as well as giving us page numbers. Second, you should briefly explain the *content* of the passage. Next, *and most importantly*, explain the *significance* of the passage:

- Does the passage strike you as bold, different, original? Why?
- Is this moment particularly moving? Especially powerful?
- Why would you like to remember this moment?
- What would you would like others to notice about it?
- Does the passage speak to something you've considered before or perhaps something you've read before (maybe in this class)?
- What do you notice about literary form, figurative language, etc.?

I have attached a sample commonplace book entry below.

At the end of term, you will study your collection and commentary, preparing a brief epilogue explaining what the collection says about you, your reading practices, your experience with the literature, etc. Reflect on the collection, search for patterns, and write a short essay (500-800 words, double-spaced, typed, MLA format and header, 12 pt. Times New Roman font) explaining the collection to me, to yourself, and to your classmates. This essay also will be submitted via WTClass as a Word attachment, and the due date is Week 15 (see Daily Schedule for specific date).

A minimum of eight entries of 200-400 words (not including the quotation itself) are due over the course of the semester. Which eight weeks you choose to contribute are up to you, but at least four entries must be completed no later than Week 7 (Friday, October 12). I am giving you a choice over which weeks you will write—but please note that this freedom brings with it a large responsibility: you must keep up with your postings, since the due dates are largely up to you.

Entries are due by 5 p.m. on Friday of the week we discuss the work in class; late entries will not be accepted or graded. The commonplace book link for each week will CLOSE at 5 p.m. on Fridays, and the next week's link will open at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday. That means that the link for Week Two, for example, will open at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, September 1, and it will close on Friday, September 7 at 5:00 p.m.

Please be clear on this point: you can only write over a work during the week we discuss (or are planning to discuss) it in class; therefore you cannot go back and write over a work from Week Two, for example, during Week Five. Keep up with your writings over the course of the semester, or you will quickly find yourself in a difficult situation.

Even though I am only requiring eight entries, I encourage you to write one entry each week, and I will look favorably upon those who choose to apply themselves more conscientiously. The more you write, the more closely you will engage with our readings, and the more you will have to draw on for the final component of this assignment.

Why am I requiring that you only write over a work during the week you read it for class? For one important reason: I want you to get your ideas and reactions down on paper while they are fresh and clear. A commonplace book is a place to capture the thoughts we have that we don't want to let slip away from us.

When preparing commonplace book entries for WTClass, you should write your response in your word processor, saving often into a specific folder on your hard drive or flash drive devoted to this course, and when you are finished writing, copy and paste your entry into the WTClass message box. It is far too easy to lose an entry when composing online, so please don't chance it. When you post your entry to the commonplace book, follow the instructions online: post in the message box—do not post the entries as attachments.

For an interesting history of commonplace books, please visit the Yale Bulletin and Calendar, 27 July 2001, available at <http://www.yale.edu/opa/v29.n34/story3.html>.

SAMPLE COMMONPLACE BOOK ENTRY

From Charlotte Smith, "On Being Cautioned Against Walking on an Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It was Frequented By a Lunatic" (41)

"Is there a solitary wretch who hies / To the tall cliff, with starting pace or slow, / And, measuring, views with wild and hollow eyes / Its distance from the waves that chide below; / Who, as the sea-born gale with frequent sighs / Chills his cold bed upon the mountain turf, / With hoarse, half-utter'd lamentation, lies / Murmuring responses to the dashing surf?" (lines 1-8)

After having talked about this poem in class, it strikes me just how much of Smith's verse is devoted to her question: "Is there a madman in the hills?" If one of the things we expect from lyric is first-person, subjective telling of his/her experience, what we seem to have here is less a depiction of something Smith has seen, but more something she has imagined. Someone told her, or "cautioned" her, as the title suggests, to stay away from that area because of the lunatic. But in Smith's poem, in her personal, subjective rendering of him, he hardly seems threatening at all—not at all the sort of figure she should need to avoid out of fear that he might harm her. Why fear this poor creature? His eyes may be "wild" (3), but they are also "hollow" (3); his pace may be frantic as he moves "with starting pace or slow" (2); and he may be a "wretch" (1)—but he's a "solitary wretch" (1) who lies on a "cold bed" (6), alone, "murmuring responses" (8) to the only thing that will talk to him, the "dashing surf" (8). How pathetic, how deeply sad.

After such a powerful depiction of such a devastated man, Smith's line "I see him more with envy than with fear" (10) seems startlingly wrenching. For this speaker, the rejected, ruined man—someone people avoid and warn others to avoid, rather than helping him or reaching out to him—is an object of envy. How much hatred for one's mental experience—to envy the mind of a madman.

I enjoy this poem tremendously, not least of which because of the tension between the dread other people have told Smith she should have of the madman, and the clear sympathy—and empathy—she has for him in this verse. I like the way she has taken a figure so easily demonized, the raving, wandering lunatic, and turned him into an emblem for her own suffering, an emblem for social isolation, and an emblem of a community's cruel rejection.

But—I wonder if her melancholic stance, her posture of personal suffering, is maybe a bit overblown, for dramatic effect perhaps? For me, I find her poem moving and deeply resonant; I know what it is to envy other people for qualities and situations that might not seem so alluring to the rest of the world, but seem desirable to me. But I can also see why others might view her sentiment as a bit too much, a bit too affected.