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4-1-2003

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Charlie Sweet

Eastern Kentucky University, charlie.sweet@eku.edu

Hal Blythe

Eastern Kentucky University, hal.blythe@eku.edu

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Recommended Citation

Sweet, Charlie and Blythe, Hal, "The Mini-Casebook--Easy As Pie" (2003). *English and Theatre Faculty and Staff Research*. 4.

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The Mini-Casebook-Easy As Pie

Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet

Hal and Charlie are professors of English at Eastern Kentucky University at Richmond, KY.

Editor's note—

In addition to their excellent article on Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," we are including a second casebook study by Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet on "American Pie." We can understand that including a casebook study on song lyrics in a journal devoted to teaching short fiction may strike some readers as needing a bit of explanation. Here it is.

First, Hal and Charlie are exceptionally accomplished teachers. They are the editors of two books on teaching and numerous articles on inspired and inspiring pedagogy. We are confident you will benefit from reading a second article by these gifted teachers. Second, Hal and Charlie are wonderful stylists: they write with clarity, of course, and also with charm and grace, making their writing a pleasure to read. Third, we believe that including their casebook on "American Pie" gives us—and you—a chance to consider just how we ought to define the parameters of short narrative.

*In this post modern era, discussions of meta fiction and other non-linear presentations characterize much of the theoretical dialogue. As a result, surely there is room to consider narrative elements in other artistic genres. Today, for example, poetry is nearly always regarded as confined to the lyric. In its earliest recorded forms, however, poetry was essentially narrative. The great heroic and epic poems, for example, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf*—are all narrative. So it is with a number of modern poems from Tennyson's "In Memoriam" to Frost's "Death of the Hired Man."*

And so it is with a great many song lyrics, including, as Hal and Charlie so deftly show, "American Pie." If there is one thing students are apt to know well, it's popular culture, especially contemporary music. As you surely know, students also spend a lot of time watching television dramas and films. We suspect that extending the definition of short narrative to a one hour television drama (actually about 40 minutes; those commercials are indeed as long as they seem), makes a lot of sense, too. At least to our students. Hal and Charlie, excellent teachers that they are, are wise enough to tap into this source of prior knowledge when asking students to do first-year writing. Their casebook on "Shiloh" shows that the lessons advanced in their "Pie" article are applicable to short fiction. So enjoy Hal's and Charlie's tour of "American Pie." If your interest is peaked, please respond to the issues raised here. Write to ESTSE—what should the parameters of short narrative be and how are narratives newly admitted to the discussion to be successfully taught?

The word came down from the highest authority: THOU SHALT TEACH THE RESEARCH PAPER. We didn't want to disobey our departmental chair's edict, but we couldn't face the traditional term paper again.

While honestly believing in the basic goal of this kind of paper, that it taught students needed skills in research and documentation, we also thought the term paper we had come to know and hate had too many drawbacks. What to do? We began with a series of guidelines, what we thought such a paper should teach as well as what it shouldn't. Then we created a project to meet these needs. The result was an end-of-term cumulative writing project that we have successfully employed for the last decade.

Our initial guideline was a research paper shouldn't intimidate students with its size. Most of our colleagues habitually assigned the traditional 10-20 page manuscript, which for students struggling with the 500-word theme was like forcing weekend hikers to climb Mt. Everest.

A research paper shouldn't intimidate students with its scope. Ideally in a general education/lower-division course, it shouldn't favor future English majors over nursing or agriculture students. Traditionally papers have been assigned on subjects more suitable for books. Asking a student to delineate the major sources influencing the literary figure of their choice (even if Jewel and Chuck Barris are off-limits) or the future of genetic research in America is asking for failure.

A research paper should indicate more than the student's ability to accumulate X-number of sources. It should stimulate curiosity. After all, since we demand original insight in regular paragraphs and themes, why not some personal declaration of judgement in a longer paper? Too many times students, simply not interested in traditional topics favored by English teachers, just go through the motions. The assignment is a mechanical exercise for which students, if motivated at all, desire only to get a good grade. The moment the paper is handed in, the skills used and the paper's subject become less important than last week's date.

Long papers shouldn't negatively reinforce mistakes in documentation. Students so often make the same mistake on page 20 as page 2. Writing error-filled footnote/endnote/Works Cited entries for magazine articles several times drills them in the incorrect form.

In addition to the problems traditional research papers present students, other problems confront teachers. In order to effectively evaluate a student's handling of a particular topic, for example, the instructor should be as well-versed in that subject matter as in documentation and writing skills. If a student does research into the salt industry in early Kentucky or the influence of S. Weir Mitchell's famed "rest cure" on Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the instructor must minimally know the basic sources so as to be able to competently judge the student's work. If Sara Warmsmile omits that pivotal Wordsmith article or a key date, the instructor must know she hasn't done a complete job of research.

A research paper should as much as possible discourage cheating. Today's instructor has to take into account the ubiquity of plagiarism. For students overwhelmed by unfamiliar requests that call on underdeveloped skills, the temptation to plagiarize is greater than that on Adam to take a bite. After all, for the price of a rock concert ticket, the student can find all the usual topics covered on various Internet sites.

Finally, the length of a paper ought to be something that an instructor can reasonably grade. One-hundred students writing ten pages of the traditional research paper provides one-quarter of a million words to read through.

After mulling over our guidelines, we realized that the challenge was to come up with a project that accomplishes the following for students:

- 1) teaches them the necessary research skills
- 2) stimulates rather than intimidate them
- 3) offers them an opportunity to develop a point of view
- 4) reinforces the skills positively.

In addition, for the instructor the project should:

- 1) provide a feeling of expertise with subject matter as well as form
- 2) control the problem of plagiarism
- 3) offer a reasonably gradeable length.

Our solution is the mini-casebook. By researching, writing, and running off copies, we have been able to solve our seven problems with one booklet.

What is a mini-casebook? In our case it's a fifteen-page booklet containing both primary and secondary sources on a specific subject. Although we have produced several such works, we have found one that seems more successful than the rest.

What are teenagers most interested in? What do they talk about? What do they spend their spare time and change on?

After nixing sex and drugs, we found the answer was as close as the nearest student lost in a DiscMan world.

ROCK.

But how does rock music help solve the seven challenges offered by the research paper? Unfortunately most students approach rock only from the

American Bandstand perspective—"It's got a great beat, easy to dance to. I'll give it an 85." In other words, they like what they have no formal training in understanding, and unlike those of us who went to college singing the protest lyrics of Bob Dylan or lip-synching to Bob Seger's songs, they have less interest in lyrics. Perhaps the latter is a good thing, since in most heavy metal and punk rock the words are indiscernible and/or deliberately senseless or in rap leave little room for interpretation.

Still, if only by default, we had to stress the words over the music. We started surveying the songs of the modern rock era (post-1955) for tunes whose lyrics offered interpretive possibilities. Recent rock yielded little as did the early rime-a-lime-a-ding-dong, bop-she-bop bop. One blast from the past, though, stood out. In 1971 Don McLean had sung a 7 and ½ minute cut whose chorus we knew by heart. The lyrics of "American Pie" won out over those of the Beatles as well as the second runner-up, Simon and Garfunkel (and, as an aside, we honestly believe that 100 years from now "American Pie" will be considered an important "fiction" of the late-20th Century).

Then we put together the actual booklet. Part one of the *Casebook* was the lyrics (the day we assign the paper we begin by playing McLean's song as well as showing a retro video and letting the students follow the words). Part II was a collection of secondary sources that included an excerpt from a book, some newspaper pieces, and several articles from popular magazines such as *Time*. One discovery of ours was a piece that read like footnotes to such McLean concerns as "the King," "the Queen," and "Jack be nimble."

Since its creation, the final product has met all our guidelines even better than we had hoped.

It teaches the necessary research skills. By providing the students with some secondary sources, we've actually given them a head-start on research. In addition, we require them to find three other secondary sources in the library, each of which has to be of a different type—i.e., book, newspaper, magazine—plus a couple of on-line sources. This variety prevents the student from over-relying on a single kind of source. How many of us have received term papers that ought to list as co-writers Funk & Wagnalls?

The brevity of the "*American Pie*" *Casebook* itself nips intimidation in the bud. For students who are typically overwhelmed by the maze of library stacks, fifteen pages doesn't seem half bad. To make the assignment

less intimidating in scope, we restrict their focus on McLean's song to six topics:

- 1) Its Use of the Chorus
- 2) Its Religious Imagery
- 3) Its Political Commentary
- 4) The Value of Rock & Roll to McLean
- 5) Its Images of Loss
- 6) The Present vs. the Past.

We chose these topics because we know that ample evidence exists within the *Casebook* and our library's holdings for the student to do an adequate job.

Unlike research projects that demand simply an accumulation of facts and figures, "American Pie" lends itself to unlimited interpretation (we'd call it literature, but that would scare the kids off). Since McLean's song is built around undefined phrases like "Miss American Pie" and "The day the music died," students are encouraged to offer their own insights drawn from both their reading of the lyrics and secondary sources. Furthermore, none of the secondary sources available gives a complete treatment of any of the assigned topics.

We avoid negative reinforcement by asking for no more than 750 words on the student's chosen topic. This brevity allows the student to double check each entry as well as the paper's structure and mechanics. We've even experimented with having the students write the entire paper from a series of notecards during two successive class periods in which we're available to answer specific questions.

Because we specify the primary source, provide a limited amount of secondary sources, and give students only six choices of topics, we control the project. Over the last decade it's been fairly easy to keep up with nearly everything written on "American Pie," and that includes the Internet, where the same basic secondary sources tend to be recycled from website to website.

This control also allows us to prevent most plagiarism. As far as we know, no term paper service, even on the Internet, has touched on our restricted topics. Additionally, since the students write in class from notes we have checked over and must turn in a notebook with copies of all their sources and drafts, plagiarism is doubly difficult. Furthermore, because we've kept up with the sources, we're certain that no student has tried to pass off some critic's viewpoint as his/her own.

Even with the large classes we often encounter, grading is kept at a minimum. Since we don't have to pause in the middle of a paper to check the exactitude of a quotation, its source, or the page number of a given article, we are able to pay more attention to comma positions, paragraph structure, logic, and content. Because we can handle so much so quickly, we even have time for students to rewrite the paper, and this revision really reinforces research and composition skills as well as giving us even more opportunity to "teach" the song's themes and techniques.

Although "American Pie" was the subject of our first mini-casebook and probably our favorite, we've found that a self-authored, controlled research text works in upper-division courses such as American Literature and English Literature. A few years ago we put together a pure fiction casebook on "Ligeia," including Poe's story, some basic footnotes, and a collection of major secondary sources (including a couple we had published). Obviously, in upper-division courses our guidelines changed because we needed literature, and with Poe the scholarly factory has churned out a lot of articles with which to become familiar. We solved that problem this semester in Am Lit II by constructing a textbook centered on Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh." Because the story is basically only 20 years old, a lot less critical ink has been spilled on its behalf; furthermore, we've published over a half-dozen articles on this story and thus didn't have to do much new research.

As far as we're concerned, the *Casebook* approach has been easy as pie. We recommend you try to bake one yourself.