

Hey, it's the 381st

# Drink Tank





# Use of Personal Experience by Michael Gallowglas



"Theme for Poetry 304"

by Michael Gallowglas

"Everything is science fiction. From the margins of an almost invisible literature has sprung the reality of the 20th Century." – J.G. Ballard,

The teacher told me:

Take a poem and let it move you

To write a new work based on something true

of your own experience. So I chose to be

inspired by Mr. Langston Hughes.

How can I feel something similar to his pain?

I am thirty-four, white, born in middle class California.

I go to school. I'm an English major because

I like to read, and I like to write stories.

I am the only genre writer in my lit classes.

Or, at least I'm the only one brave (stupid) enough

To mention this to my teachers and fellow students. Time and again,

they dismiss what I have to say because my approach is from:

Asimov, Herbert, Tolkien, and Ellison, (being Harlan, and not Ralph)

Rather than: Melville, Hawthorn, Thoreau, and Elliot.

It's not easy to stand there and take it, when you claim

that writing isn't true. Though it resonates with the

same human conditions – It sees and feels, and explores and searches,

and sometimes does it better than "Serious Literature."

Some of which should be fired out of the canon.

I'm, mostly over it now. Mostly. I see their narrow-minded view.

They do not understand what I love, and because they do not understand,

they fear, and because they fear, they ridicule,

and push each genre to its own literary ghetto.

But that's okay, because genre writing is here to stay.

Now, I find I pity those who refuse to open themselves to genre,

they will never know the joy of reading:

*"The enemy's gate is down."* – Orson Scott Card

*"I will not fear. Fear is the Mind-Killer."* – Frank Herbert

*"The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."* – Steven King

*"'Repent Harlequin!' said the Ticktockman."* – Harlan Ellison

*"That we should suffer so much fear and doubt over so small a thing."* – J.R.R. Tolkien

*"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent."* – Isaac Asimov

*"Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."* – J.K. Rowling

*"Life would be unbearably dull if we had answers to all our questions."* – Jim Butcher

*"By not acknowledging our fear, we fall victim to the lies we tell ourselves, and those are the most dangerous lies of all, the hardest lies to see beyond."* – M. Todd Gallowglas

*You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. Don't ever count on having both at once.* – Robert Heinlein

These writers and their words are my refuge and the voice

Of a vast tradition worth exploring, but sadly some don't,

And that makes them somewhat less free.

That is my poem for Poetry 304

*“Science fiction is a concerned art form, for even in its shallowest version, it deals with the future and the potentialities of man’s place in it...I write it because it refuses not to be written.”* – Harlan Ellison

The above poem was inspired by Langston Hughes’s poem, “Theme for English B” because I was ridiculed in a poetry literature class for being, “That scifi guy.” It began when the teacher made a flippant comment about my interest in the literature of science fiction and fantasy. More often than not, students and teachers in English departments across the country, often have strong opinions about what “true” writing is and what it isn’t. Most of the time, they are speaking about “literature.” I empathized with the narrator of Hugh’s, “Theme for English B” because he feels that he is not understood because he’s the only colored student in his class. Most of the time, I feel like the proverbial black sheep in literature classes because I like science fiction and fantasy. Their ridicule and prejudice stings me just as much as any ignorant, knee-jerk reaction.

Many people scoff at science fiction saying that it is nothing more than escapist fluff, and as has no bearing on modern society. While Science Fiction is primarily for enjoyment, important messages can frequently be found in entertainment. As long as humans have entertained other humans, they have placed moral and spiritual values in their stories. Aesop’s fables – which have lasted since the Roman Empire – are first and foremost stories to entertain children, but there is a moral lesson to be learned from each one of those simple stories. William Shakespeare did in every one of his plays, such as in Hamlet when we hear the line, “To thine own self be true.” Shakespeare wrote his plays to entertain people, yet today we find his work a treasury of time-

less ideas that have shaped the English language and culture for hundreds of years.

Critics of science fiction might say that we find none of these merits in the works of science fiction.

In the 1930’s Isaac Asimov wrote a story about an automated, sentient machine created in a humanoid form. He called this machine a “robot”. The term had never been used before, and this is only one example of how a science fiction story has affected the “future.” While science fiction writers did not get every minute detail right, they have predicted enough of things to come to make a reader pause and wonder. Science fiction not only predicted space travel and man walking on the moon, it also foresaw things that we have today without blinking an eye: television, computers, submarines, organs transplants, and satellites in geo-synchronous orbit. In his ground breaking 1986 novel, *Nueromancer*, William Gibson wrote about the dangers of Internet addiction when the Internet was taking its first limping steps of infancy. Or, in the words of writer J.G. Ballard, “Everything is science fiction. From the margins of an almost invisible literature has sprung the reality of the 20th Century.”

True, while some science fiction stories are so far outside of the scope of realistic speculation, they arouse people’s curiosity of things to come. On the other hand, as writer Joan Vinge said, “Science Fiction is the anthropology of the future,” science fiction can mirror issues present in the here and now.

For example:

*Billy smiles as he slams the clip into his .75 caliber Colt ThunderGod™. His thumb flicks the safety from “wimp” to “frag”. Holding it makes him feel like a man.*

*“ThunderGod™,” Billy says, his commanding baritone reverberating from deep in his barrel thick chest. “Accept no substitute.”*

*“I won’t trust a man with anything less to guard my rear,” breathes a sultry voice with just a hint of British accent.*

*Billy turns and soaks up the vision of his partner. Any man who spends even five minutes on the ‘Net™ wants Selena™. Dozens of corporations spend millions of dollars every year on case studies to continually refine the archetypal male fantasy. Selena™ is the outcome, the pinnacle combination of physical training, plastic surgery, and extensive model and acting training. Her physical attributes and wardrobe change weekly based on a poll on her web sight. Today she’s wearing a chain mail bikini top, a short, plaid skirt barely hanging on her ample hips, and thigh high, patent-leather boots. Her hair is coal black with white highlights shot through that look like spider webs. She’s dressed just like her part in the upcoming movie STAR WARS™ XVII: PRADATORS™ OF THE MATRIX™. Billy can’t wait to see it.*

*Logos from her corporate sponsors are strategically tattooed on her thighs, the tops of her breast, and – even though Billy can’t see them – he knows there are twin tattoos just below the curve of Selena’s buttocks. Billy doesn’t even consider her eyes, instead, his gaze lingers on her ample double d breasts and the words “Milk: It does a body good!™” emblazoned upon them. His mouth starts watering and agrees that milk would do his body just fine.*

*“Are you ready to put that gun to good use?” Selena™ asks. On the word “gun” she pauses and glances down, her eyes full of promises to come.*

*“I was born ready,” Billy assures her.*

*“Then let’s get to it,” she says with a naughty smirk, reaches over her shoulder, and draws twin katana from behind her back. The blades of both samurai swords gleam in the pale light cast by the street lamps. Each has glowing neon letters etched on the blade. “Cut through traffic with the Suzuki™ Katana™.”*

*Billy turns toward the alley where their prey awaits. The walls are plastered with posters advertising everything from movies to clothes to video games to food to personal hygiene products that promise to make one irresistible to the opposite sex. The alley dead-ends about forty feet away. A single door is that far wall’s only occupant.*

*Making his way toward that door, Billy scans the posters. He’s going to need that information later.*

*Now that he’s in the alley, he sees discarded wrappers from all the major fast food chains, all of them tantalizing him with the grand prize of their latest contests. Of course, these all tie into several of the movies postered on the wall. Again, he soaks all this in.*

*They’re at the door. Billy wraps his free hand around the door handle. He takes a deep breath. The moment right before is always his favorite. This is going to be good. Just before turning the knob, he feels Selena lick his lower earlobe, and whisper, “Let’s go have a little fun.” The cool night air tingles against his ear where her saliva left a trail. His toes curl and all his... muscles... harden. Yeah, this is going to be really good.*

*He twists the knob and yanks the door open. Selena dives through, and Billy follows.*

*The room beyond the door’s threshold is filled with over a dozen leather-clad, gun-wielding, sword-swinging Badguys™. Each of these Badguys™ is wearing logos and ads for those companies and*

products that compete with the ones in alley outside and those adorning Selena's™ magnificent body.

Billy doesn't bother to count. He takes aim with his .75 caliber Colt ThunderGod™ and starts blasting Badguys™. Selena™ is already cutting into them. In moments the bullets and blood are flying. Billy and Selena move through the room, violent poetry in motion. A minute and a half later, all the Badguys™ are down, the logos they wear are mangled by either Selena's™ blades or Billy's bullets.

There is one last Badguy™ in the corner groaning from a stomach wound. Billy walks over to him and empties the clip from his .75 caliber Colt ThunderGod™ into his head.

Billy turns to Selena™. She drops her swords, smiles, and reaches behind her back to undo the straps on the bikini top. Billy knows nothing's going to happen, but like every time he gets to this moment, he hopes against hope that someone forgets to...

Billy ground his teeth in frustration the moment the virtual reality program ended. He pulled the Virtual Reality™ helmet off his head and slid it under his desk, while outraged cries fills the classroom. Billy stopped doing that after the first few times. It never helped.

"Whining won't do any good," Mr. Thomas said from the head of the classroom. "You know you have to wait until high school before you meet the age requirement for virtual sexual experience."

"But I'm already fourteen," Lucy Dibiasi said.

"You don't get rewarded for being held back a grade, Ms. Dibiasi," Mr. Thomas said. "Stop laugh-

ing class and settle down. For today's assignment, I want you to write an analysis of the simulation noting the effective use of at least ten of the advertisement placements and how those products benefit our lives. Bonus points for anyone who brings one of these products to class and can effectively demonstrate its importance."

Billy powered up his Tablet PC™ and waited for the two minutes of ads to go by before opening up MS Word™ so he could get to work. One ad caught his eye, and he had the perfect topic for his paper, though he'd have to stop in the school store during lunch to pick up something for class tomorrow. Thank God his parents got him that secure credit card for school emergencies like this.

Many people might ignore Billy's story, or downplay the messages it conveys because it's "science fiction." However, America may be closer than anyone suspects. In the book, Culture Jam, Kalle Lasn, states: "Your kids watch Pepsi and Snickers ads in the classroom. (The school has made the devil's bargain of accepting free audiovisual equipment in exchange for airing these ads on "Channel One.") In Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser writes: "The fast food chains run ads on Channel One, the commercial television network whose programming is now shown in classrooms, almost every school day, to eight million of the nation's middle, junior, and high school students – a teen audience fifty times bigger than that of MTV..."

Advertising in schools is becoming big business, and for good reason. Like the prisoners in Plato's, "Allegory of the Cave," students in our current school system sit passively at their desks absorbing information presented to them. In the early 1970's Paulo Friere introduced the "banking concept of

education” which advertisers use against America’s youth, laughing all the way to the bank. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire writes: “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality imposed on them.”

This creates, quite literally, a captive audience for companies to focus their advertising power. It might not be very long before the advertising giants blatantly flex their economic muscles not only into education, but politics as well. Children born today might grow up to live in a bleak reflection of George Orwell’s novel 1984, where it is illegal for citizens to turn off their TV so the government can constantly pump propaganda into peoples’ homes. There are also TV’s on every street corner, built into walls, and even in the sidewalks. All of these television monitors go both ways, so the government can watch the watchers and know which of their propaganda techniques are working. Or perhaps the future might be more like Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, where books are illegal because they get people thinking too much, and firemen burn down houses that have books hidden in them.

Fredrick Pohl, one of science fiction’s most celebrated authors, said, “It’s a pity that taxpayers don’t read science fiction. They might know about the age they’re buying.” Awareness of the future is the responsibility of the individual. People need to wake up and educate themselves on the future their politicians are purchasing (on credit no less) from future generations and do something about it by exercising their voting power. Unfortunately, hindsight tells us that mass mobilization only happens in

America during great catastrophe such as the 9/11 attacks and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, or when something happens to peoples’ favorite TV shows. Every year, more letters written protesting choices made in Hollywood than in Washington DC. (It is interesting to note that one of the largest letter writing campaigns in American History was conducted to keep the original *Star Trek* from being cancelled.) Even though we’ve seen glimpses of many potential futures from the writings of Orwell, Bradbury, Gibson and others, the country’s pattern suggests that its only a matter of time before little Billy will be writing essays about the benefits of the products he sees advertised during his daily (hourly?) trip into the world of Virtual Reality™.

*English teacher Harry Thomas watched as his eighth grade students attacked their keyboards. He hoped that this assignment would get some of them into the school store during lunch hour following class, or maybe after school. The school sponsors had only required that the essay list five products, but he thought ten would really get the money in their pockets burning. He could really use a bonus this month.*

*Harry sighed. He remembered years ago when he first became a teacher. He planned on changing the world, one student at a time. But that was before marriage and kids, car payment and mortgage. Now he was a bit more of a realist. Teachers didn’t get paid enough to live on, but they could afford quite a nice lifestyle with the corporate kickbacks from sales made in the student store. And besides, Christmas™ was coming, and he didn’t want to disappoint the wife and kids.*



*“It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be. . . . This, in turn, means that our statesmen, our businessmen, our everyman must take on a science fictional way of thinking.” - Isaac Asimov*

### **“Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes**

The instructor said,

*Go home and write*

*a page tonight.*

*And let that page come out of you--*

*Then, it will be true.*

I wonder if it's that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here

to this college on the hill above Harlem.

I am the only colored student in my class.

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,

through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,

Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,

the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator

up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me

at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what

I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:

hear you, hear me--we two--you, me, talk on this page.

(I hear New York, too.) Me--who?

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,

or records--Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like

the same things other folks like who are other races.

So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white.

But it will be

a part of you, instructor.

You are white--

yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That's American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.

Nor do I often want to be a part of you.

But we are, that's true!

As I learn from you,

I guess you learn from me--

although you're older--and white--

and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

