

Syntax, Hell

By Martin Blayney 2007

‘To mark or not to mark: that is the question. Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the poor use of tense and non-existent paragraphs, or to take arms against this sea of many, many troubles and end them?’ This is what toiled in my mind that fated afternoon.

‘To die: to sleep; perchance to dream’ was right up the top of my little list of demands, for I’d had it with them. ‘Them’ being the piles of half-attempted scrawls of literary filth that were apparently Year 11 practice essays. I felt like the great Hamlet at that moment: should I attack this drivel before me, or should I wallow in our deadly shared flaw, procrastination, and give up, just to run to the nearest bar and order a large tequila?

But wait: a sudden spring in the plot of my life leapt into action, as ominous echoes flooded the derelict hallway outside. Steady and measured footsteps grew increasingly louder, before they stopped right outside my makeshift classroom.

The antique grade door slammed open, the graffiti-caked window quaked as none other than the prime feature of said Year 11 English class, Miss Madison Heyes, strode into the class along with her expected primly lined jacket, and an equally primly lined expression. This girl meant business.

‘Since when does strong, vocabulated text of this calibre not achieve the standard? I’m shocked in you, Ms. Foster,’ came her indignant remark, as she juvenily stamped, one foot after the other, to my desk before striking her well-rehearsed pose; made *just so* to expose every whiff of imposing nature upon whoever its poor victim was. I considered my considerings, I planned my plan, and just plain tried to work out what the hell I could do next.

‘If you are referring to the creative writing assessment mark I gave you, I wonder, did you ever stop to review and rework your work? Seriously now, I was genuinely shocked at your muddy semblance of a plot, and the very *dry* characterisation. A poor attempt all-round. You did, in fact, proofread your work, did you not Ms. Heyes?’ flowed the words from my mouth. While this may sound something on the harsh side to say to her, in the context of this story it was very much *mild*. I could have said many more things about that drivel than would have been prudent.

‘Yes, I did, and *no*, I do *not* find that a fair thing to say. Someone in your position shouldn’t be talking about *dry*. You wouldn’t even know the meaning of the word,’ struck back the spawn of Satan, haughty expression engaged. I swear, I could have swung for her then. How dare she talk about that? My drinking doesn’t interfere with my professional career at all. I was at breaking point, with her minx-esque little smile beaming at me, as if I had picked up the ‘Go to Jail’ card in some macabre game of Monopoly. I just had to stay calm. I could not let her have one up on me.

‘Well, that was *very* surprising, Madison. There were at least 15 mistakes I picked up on through your writing, and grammatical structure was torn to the wind. The marking exemplar clearly states that, I quote, “Writing conventions must be used accurately.”’ ‘Unconventional structure and neologisms may be enliterated through my story, but they’re perfectly acceptable, in my *most* humblest opinion,’ shot back her return.

'I do not believe, quote, "attempt" or "deside" will ever be considered neologisms, Ms. Heyes. Do not try and pull the wool over my eyes, I can clearly tell that you did this at the very last minute before the due date, just assuming you would get an excellence. I'm sorry, but that just isn't up to the standards of my class.' Those quotes were only the scrapings at the top of the molehill of typological errors in that *thing*. At one point, she even inadvertently knocked the caps-lock aND wROTE eNTIRE pARAGRAPHS iN tHIS mANNER. It was the John Travolta of creative writing pieces.

'Well, I'm not sure what *you* think, but I'd think a few minor errors wouldn't matter. In fact, I think my father would think the same.'

There it came. The one comment I just knew was *dying* to claw its way out of her teeth. Not only does she butcher the English language as we know it, but expects to be rewarded for it? All because of a certain proud little father? I was not standing for this.

'If that is, in fact, Mr. Bradford Heyes' opinions, then he'd better come see me about this, personally. He had best not have his daughter sending me his messages. I think it would be best if I also have a little chat with him to discuss your progress (or lack of it) in class. Not turning up most of the time, and even when you do there's nothing being done. I'll definitely be waiting for his call, Miss Heyes.'

I tried to take the upper hand and leave while I still had the last word. I bolted up, and strode in a (hopefully) imposing way to the door – hoping she would follow suit. Her father did not scare me then, and still does not scare me now. She had landed on the chance card in her own sinister game of Monopoly, but just got fines.

A little blur, red at the face, stamped out of my classroom at top speed. However, just when it seemed like that would be the last of her for today, she turned; and in her spoilt little manner sent me a leer that even Stalin himself would quiver under.

'This will be the end of your career, *Jaqueline* Foster. You'll never work in the teaching sector again when my father is done with you,' came her last remark, as she shot back down the hell-hole of a corridor she came from. After such a terror of a conversation with that a terror of a girl, I knew the first thing I needed was that tequila. Stat.

A week has passed now, and there's still been no infuriating visit from the Heyes. From the moment she stormed away, I knew I had to be completely unwavering on this. Head of the Education Board or no, I needed to stay strong on this, or else my job would mean nothing to me. If I could be swayed with a little threat, then I'm not the person I thought I was. However, I've noticed in the last few days a terribly menacing grin across her scheming face, as if it were etched on with needles. I did, surprisingly, receive a bottle of some odd-tasting vintage absinthe from the Heyes family today; I guess I should take it as a peace offering of sorts. However, a sneaking suspicion dawned on me some five minutes ago: I realised I'm a lot more like Hamlet than I thought before: we both have a certain burning question plaguing us. While his was the infamous 'To be or not to be', mine is surely more along the lines of 'Will I be or not be after the next drink?'