

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts,
Creative Works Strand, Vol.3 No.2, Fall/Winter 2016, pp. 1-5
Ubiquity: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/>
ISSN: 2379-3007

Conversing, Learning and Teaching: Performance as Natural as Breathing

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We explore performance across the strands in this issue of *Ubiquity*, and in this Creative Strand, our visual work is very performative. The literary work we have gathered this time has to do with that evergreen topic of conversation, school, in which we perform our identities to strangers for the first time and in the process, seek friends, approval, even love. Our authors this time around deal with school from the perspective of writers and teachers.

Our visual work is also striking and very different. As you will learn if you peruse the abstracts presented, Sarah Fletcher's photograph "Steam" does not just refer to the excrescence from a locomotive in the U.K.; it also refers to the general mien of the fellow who appears to be in charge of that engine. Fletcher's photo captures him performing the emotion of someone who is really "steamed." In "Antistrophos," the diptych by Olena M. Marshall, we learn that the two animated women depicted in intense conversation are the eminent Ayn Rand and Hannah Arendt. They are "performing" whatever differences of opinion might exist in such diverse philosophers; during their lives, which overlapped to a great degree, those opinions seemed to join in their fervent opposition to totalitarianism.

Although countless books, television shows and movies deal with our collective experience of school, usually it is from the perspective of the student. This is because nearly all of us have been to school as students, while not all of us have been teachers. Perhaps no one "performs" information, erudition, and perspective as much as the average teacher. Five days a week, for six to eight hours each day, the workaday teacher performs English, science, social studies, and many more subtle areas of learning and expertise to an array of schoolchildren. Meanwhile, the young people they seek to mold do their best to "perform" as they imagine a

young person should, in order to be safe, to have friends, to be “cool.” These aspects of performance are explored in the literary works we present in this issue. Specifically, the poetry of Sheryl A. Lain asks us to “notice” students with her as she teaches writing, and as she finds the humanity and distinct creative style of each student she talks about. We also visit with author Jeff Spanke as we present his story that creates a wonderful parallel with Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (Bierce, Evans, & Atkins, 2003), which so many of us read as high school students. His “Thinking Cure: Or, An Occurrence at Owl Creek High School” is a sharply observed satire of intellectual transformation at a school from the point of view, once again, of an educator, and it is a must read.

The noted sociologist Erving Goffman was certain that we “perform” ourselves every day to everyone around us. It is part of our socially negotiated natures. Who we are emerges to a great extent in conversation, in listening and in watching other people. All of the artists in this issue watched people perform very closely indeed.

References

Bierce, A., Evans, R. C., & Atkins, E. W. (2003). *Ambrose Bierce's "An occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": An annotated critical edition*. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press.

Author Bio: J. Patrick McGrail is Associate Professor of Communication at Jacksonville State University. He teaches media literacy, television news and video production. Prior to his career in academia, McGrail worked in television and radio as an actor and director. He also has a keen interest in poetry and music production, and he holds a number of musical copyrights himself.