

**Readers may be divided into four classes:**

- 1.) Sponges, who absorb all that they read and return it in nearly the same state, only a little dirtied.
- 2.) Sand-glasses, who retain nothing and are content to get through a book for the sake of getting through the time.
- 3.) Strain-bags, who retain merely the dregs of what they read.
- 4.) Mogul diamonds, equally rare and valuable, who profit by what they read, and enable others to profit by it also. -Coleridge

I.

As the Wisconsin sky sewed itself shut like a week-old wound, H. D. Shea strolled into Better Buy Books store on Curry and O'Link Street to carry out his weekly disruption of the Established Order of Things.

As he drifted in through the door, brief, intense gazes with thrown his way, accompanied by arched brows and narrowed eyelids. Each time he received this dubious welcome, H.D. knew that his infamy was indeed increasing, and that his quiet revolution, actually a reclamation, was slowly seducing that slippery temptress, success.

In reality, though, it was not his exploits that announced his presence, but his smell.

It was queasy, salt-soaked smell, as if he'd rolled around naked in a pile of stale pretzels for the better part of a decade, and it burst into the room like an armed criminal upon his entry, whipping up nostrils into little seizures of expand-and-contract, filling sacks of skin beneath the eyes with stinging hot water, and sending noses diving headfirst into dust-choked tomes, in hopes that the old-book smell would effectively kill off the dead-man smell.

With bottom half of their face immersed in the scratchy safehouse of a hoary textbook or thumb-ravaged romance, they would cast about urgently for the source of this forceful fetor, finding it in the guise of a sullied, corpulent, baby-cheeked, olive-eyed, Hitler-mustached, wildly perspiring fortysomething, strutting about like he'd just bought the place and winding and unwinding some invisible string with his silly-putty hands.

After a moment's self-satisfied pacing, he would stop and survey his surroundings, setting in motion a frenzied, silent chorus of "*please, not by me, not my table, not by me-*" until he finally sidled over to the Good Taste Art and Coffee Bar and leaned imposingly over the counter to place his order.

"Hoping to clear out early, are we?", he asked the sheet-white, sharp-eyed twig of a barista, who was hurriedly removing today's specials from the display case.

"Oh, no no no. I mean- ",

“Do you have it on good faith, Miss, that no one will want a turkey-chipotle wrap for the next...oh....(he paused to check his watch, a well-rehearsed and effective bit)...98 minutes?”

“You know, I guess I don’t!”, she chirped, her voice colored hastily and generously by compulsory sincerity as she set out to return said wrap to its rightful place, along with two cheesy pretzels, a chicken Dijon sandwich, and several permutations of cheesecake.

“Could you wait to do that until I place my order?”, he clucked imperatorially, sharpening his ears to catch a telltale huff, an aloof flip-flop of her almond irises, the agitated scratch of phlegm against throat-

*I don't appreciate your attitude*, the words were on his lips, his ammunition and then-

“Sure, of course! What can I get you?”

Chipper, unaffected, not a beat missed.

Touche, he thought, smiling wryly and flicking the hairs of his Gestapo ‘stache in her direction with a stubby finger as if tipping a hat. A nigh-impenetrable enemy. As an acknowledgement of his deep respect for a worthy adversary, he took his wrap and cup of hot tea to a nearby table, resolving not to trouble her for, oh, about ten minutes.

As coffeeshop customers young-and-old scooped up their literature and flocked to some far-off nook untouched by the relentless stench of the naked-in-pretzels man, H.D. sat down, and pulled an envelope out of his jacket, sprawled its contents out and began to proofread them;

*Dr. Allen,*

*Before I arrive at the crux of this letter, I should note that, while I have composed it with uncharacteristic ire, I did, up until a few weeks ago, hold the recipient-that is to say, you-in the highest conceivable regard. I attended (and was most impressed by) your Herodotus lecture at Lawrence University, and I own every edition of “Prepared for A Priori; Deconstructing Kant”, except of course for the fourth one, as the foreword is written by Raymond Davies, who, as I’m sure you know, has recently*

*dirtied his hands with a foray into the diseased popular music industry. Consequently, I was both shocked and saddened to witness my own admiration crystallize into cold, focused fury when you released your twentieth annual "Great Texts" list last week. More specifically, the root from which my anger has sprouted is your undeniably conformist, staggeringly foolish decision to include that most puerile and empty of mistakenly declared "classics", Austen's Pride and Prejudice. This is a choice both vulgar and without merit, as is the work with which it is concerned. "Samuel Clemens" would tend to agree with me, noting in one of his classic essays that he "detests" the abominable Ms. Austen's characters "without reserve", and that "any library is a good library that does not contain a volume by Jane Austen." And her fellow Englishwoman, the inimitable Bronte, equated her oeuvre to a "highly cultivated garden", bemoaning its lack of "bright, vivid physiognomy". But while both aforementioned sentiments are both valid and, without a doubt, not the least bit untruthful, they are mired in subjectivity, and as such will do little good when it comes to making headway in my objectively correct argument. However, in order to properly arrive at the indubitable truth inherent in said argument, I must request your patience, as the tenets of my chosen method of expostulation are inextricably bound to the specifics of my upbringing-*