



Comparing
Literature

School's Out (1936)
by Allan Rohan Crite.
Smithsonian American Art
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home late from the office. “He’s not watching television, or busy with his airplanes—”

“In his room, doing over his homework for the ninety-eighth time. It has to be perfect, he says. But, really, Charles, don’t you think it was outrageous?”

Mr. Clark stirred his coffee. “I bet Miss Orville doesn’t get down on the floor with the class. Or do Mexican hat dances with them.”

“If that’s meant to disparage¹² Miss Wilson—” Virginia Clark stacked the dinner dishes irritably. She sometimes found her husband’s behavior maddening. Especially when he took to grinning at her, as he was presently doing. She also concluded that she’d had her fill of Elizabeth’s attitude on the subject. “At last some teacher’s wised up to Roge,” had been the Clarks’ daughter’s comment. “He’s cute and all, but I wouldn’t want to be in a shipwreck with him.” Washing dishes in the kitchen, Mrs. Clark considered that maybe she wouldn’t meet Roger in front of school tomorrow. Maybe she’d wait at the corner instead. “His shoes,” she gasped, and hurried to remind her son to get out the polishing kit. The spelling, too, she’d better work on that . . . 14

12. **disparage** (di·spar’ij) v.: show disrespect for; “put down.”

INFER

14 Why do Roger’s sister and father think Miss Orville is an improvement over Miss Wilson?

It was on Thursday that Nancy Reeves finally remembered where previously she had seen Miss Orville. Perhaps it was from the shock of having received a compliment from the latter.

"Mrs. Reeves, I rejoice to inform you of progress," Miss Orville had addressed her, after the third grade had performed its military display for the afternoon. "On Monday, young Bruce's penmanship was comparable to a chicken's—if a chicken could write. Today, I was pleased to award him an A."

A tug at the tweed jacket, and the stiff-backed figure walked firmly down the street. Nancy Reeves stared after her until Miss Orville had merged into the flow of pedestrians and traffic. "I know who she is," Nancy suddenly remarked, turning to the other mothers. "I knew I'd seen her before. Those old ramshackle buildings near us on Hudson Street—remember when they were torn down last year?" The other mothers formed a circle around her. "Miss Orville was one of the tenants," Nancy Reeves went on. "She'd lived there for ages, and refused to budge until the landlord got a court order and deposited her on the sidewalk. I *saw* her there, sitting in a rocker on the sidewalk, surrounded by all this furniture and plants. Her picture was in the papers. Elderly retired schoolteacher . . . they found a furnished room for her on Jane Street, I think. Poor old thing, evicted like that . . . I remember she couldn't keep any of the plants . . ."

On the way home, after supplying a lurid account of the day's tortures—"Miss Awful made Walter Meade stand in the corner for saying a bad word"—Roger asked his mother, "Eviction. What does that mean?"

"It's when somebody is forced by law to vacate an apartment. The landlord gets an eviction notice, and the person has to leave."

"Kicked her out on the street. Is that what they did to the witch?" 15

"Don't call her that, it's rude and impolite," Mrs. Clark said, as they turned into the brownstone doorway. "I can see your father and I have been too easygoing where you're concerned."

"Huh, we've got worse names for her," Roger retorted. "Curse names, you should hear 'em. We're planning how to get even with Miss Awful, just you see." He paused, as his mother opened the downstairs door with her key. "That's where the cat used to sleep, remember?" he said, pointing at a corner of the entryway. His face was grave and earnest. "I wonder where that cat went to. Hey, Mom," he hurried to catch up. "Maybe *it* was evicted, too."

Then it was Friday at St. Geoffrey's. Before lunch, Miss Orville

INFER

15 Nancy Reeves remembers something about Miss Orville. What does her memory tell you about Miss Orville's character?

told the class, "I am happy to inform you that Miss Wilson will be back on Monday." She held up her hand for quiet. "This afternoon will be my final session with you. Not that discipline will relax, but I might read you a story. Robert Louis Stevenson, perhaps. My boys and girls always enjoyed him so. Forty-six years of them . . . Joseph Lambert, you're not sitting up straight. You know I don't permit slouchers in my class."

It was a mistake to have told the children that Miss Wilson would be back on Monday, that only a few hours of the terrible reign of Miss Awful were left to endure. Even before lunch recess, a certain spirit of challenge and defiance had infiltrated¹³ into the room. Postures were still erect, but not quite as erect. Tommy Miller dropped his pencil case on the floor and did not request permission to pick it up.

"Ahhh, so what," he mumbled, when Miss Orville remonstrated¹⁴ with him.

"What did you say?" she demanded, drawing herself up.

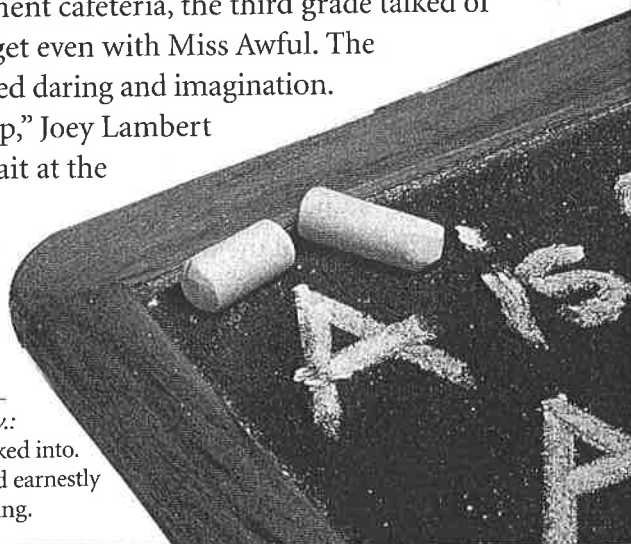
"I said, so what," Tommy Miller answered, returning her stare without distress.

Roger thought that was neat of Tommy, talking fresh like that. He was surprised, too, because Miss Awful didn't yell at Tommy or anything. A funny look came into her eyes, he noticed, and she just went on with the geography lesson. And when Tommy dropped his pencil case again, and picked it up without asking, she said nothing. Roger wasn't so certain that Tommy should have dropped the pencil case a second time. The lunch bell rang, then, and he piled out of the classroom with the others, not bothering to wait for permission. **16**

At lunch in the basement cafeteria, the third grade talked of nothing except how to get even with Miss Awful. The recommendations showed daring and imagination.

"We could beat her up," Joey Lambert suggested. "We could wait at the corner till she goes by, and throw rocks at her."

13. **infiltrated** (in·fil'trāt'id) *v.*: gradually entered or sneaked into.
14. **remonstrated** *v.*: reasoned earnestly in protest against something.



INFER

16 Why do you think it was a mistake for Miss Orville to tell the children it was her last day?



“We’d get arrested,” Walter Meade pointed out.

“Better idea,” said Bruce Reeves. “We could go upstairs to the classroom before she gets back, and tie a string in front of the door. She’d trip, and break her neck.”

“She’s old,” Roger Clark protested. “We

can’t hurt her like that. She’s too old.”

It was one of the girls, actually, who thought of the plant. “That dopey old plant she’s always fussing over,” piped Midge Fuller. “We could rip off all the dopey leaves. That’d show her.”

Roger pushed back his chair and stood up from the table. “We don’t want to do that,” he said, not understanding why he objected. It was a feeling inside, he couldn’t explain . . . “Aw, let’s forget about it,” he said. “Let’s call it quits.”

“The plant, the plant,” Midge Fuller squealed, clapping her hands.

Postures were a good deal worse when the third grade reconvened after lunch. “Well, you’ve put in an industrious week, I daresay . . .” Miss Orville commented. She opened the frayed volume of *Treasure Island* which she had brought from home and turned the pages carefully to Chapter One. “I assume the class is familiar with the tale of young Jim Hawkins, Long John Silver, and the other wonderful characters.”

“No, I ain’t,” said Tommy Miller.

“Ain’t. What word is that?”

“It’s the word ain’t,” answered Tommy.

“Ain’t, ain’t,” somebody jeered.

Miss Orville lowered the frayed volume. “No, children, you mustn’t do this,” she said with force. “To attend school is a privilege you must not mock. Can you guess how many thousands of children in the world are denied the gift of schooling?” Her lips quavered. “It is a priceless gift. You cannot permit yourselves to squander a moment of it.” She rose from her desk and looked down at the rows

of boys and girls. "It isn't enough any longer to accept a gift and make no return for it, not with the world in the shape it's in," she said, spectacles trembling on her bony nose. "The world isn't a playbox," she said. "If I have been severe with you this past week, it was for your benefit. The world needs good citizens. If I have helped one of you to grow a fraction of an inch, if just *one* of you—"

She stopped speaking. Her voice faltered, the words dammed up. She was staring at the plant on the window sill, which she had not noticed before. The stalks twisted up bare and naked, where the leaves had been torn off. "You see," Miss Orville said after a moment, going slowly to the window sill. "You *see* what I am talking about? To be truly educated is to be civilized. Here, you may observe the opposite." Her fingers reached out to the bare stalks. "Violence and destruction . . ." She turned and faced the class, and behind the spectacles her eyes were dim and faded. "Whoever is responsible, I beg of you only to be sorry," she said. When she returned to her desk, her back was straighter than ever, but it seemed to take her longer to cover the distance. 17

At the close of class that afternoon, there was no forming of lines. Miss Orville merely dismissed the boys and girls and did not leave her desk. The children ran out, some in regret, some silent, others cheerful and scampering. Only Roger Clark stayed behind.

He stood at the windows, plucking at the naked plant on the sill. Miss Orville was emptying the desk of her possessions, books, pads, a folder of maps. "These are yours, I believe," she said to Roger. In her hands were the water pistol, the baseball cards, the spool of string. "Here, take them," she said.

Roger went to the desk. He stuffed the toys in his coat pocket without paying attention to them. He stood at the desk, rubbing his hand up and down his coat.

"Yes?" Miss Orville asked.

Roger stood back, hands at his side, and lifted his head erectly. "Flower," he spelled. "*F-l-o-w-e-r*." He squared his shoulders and looked at Miss Orville's brimming eyes. "Castle," Roger spelled. "*C-a-s-t-l-e*."

Then he walked from the room. 18

**COMPARE AND
CONTRAST**

17 What kind of behavior does Miss Orville contrast with civilized behavior?

INTERPRET

18 What message do you think Roger means to give Miss Orville when he spells *flower* and *castle* correctly?