

# A scholarship boy's nostalgia



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In his essay "The Achievement of Desire," Richard Rodriguez acts as both a writer and reader in response to a book written by Richard Hoggart entitled *The Uses of Literacy*. Rodriguez discovers a parallel between his own life and the life of what Hoggart coins as a "scholarship boy." A scholarship boy is defined as a child from a working-class family who feels as if he "cannot afford to admire his parents...[so] he concentrates on the benefits that education will bestow on him." (566). For Rodriguez, the discovery and reading of the definition prompts him to gain the courage to realize and admit that his academic success is due to his early, emotional separation from both his family and his culture.

Discovering Hoggart's book was an epic moment in Rodriguez's life. His nostalgic experience is expressed when he writes, "For the first time I realized that there were other students like me, and so I was able to frame the meaning of my academic success, its consequent price- the loss." (564). Rodriguez's academic success began when the "deepest love" he had for his parents turned into "embarrassment for their lack of education." (566). Like Hoggart's scholarship boy, he started isolating himself from them and transitioning his respect to his teachers. He realized that his parents had no room for societal growth, and if he chose to follow in their footsteps, he would be doomed to the same working-class life that they were marginalized into. Rodriguez's embarrassment of his parents served as a catalyst to further his education. By idolizing his teachers, he realized that he was opening the doors to success.

The only problem with opening the doors to success is that another door closes behind it. The intimate, family life in which Rodriguez found so much

pleasure was left in a self-deprecating manner. He began to associate pleasure with inferiority. For a scholarship boy, it is “clear that education is a long, unglamorous, even demeaning process...” (578). Rodriguez would go to the library and check out the maximum number of books. Many of these books were recommendations from the teachers he admired so much or librarians who had gained a new fondness for him. This mirrors the words of Hoggart when he writes, “...[The scholarship boy] rarely discovers an author for himself and on his own.” (845). Every time Rodriguez did discover a book on his own and found it pleasurable, he disregarded it. There was no room for pleasure in his life.

During grade school, Hoggart's scholarship boys endure the constant feeling of harsh loneliness. The scholarship boy would always be the first to answer a teacher's question to the annoyance of the other students. In his home life, the scholarship boy feels as if he does not identify with his family, so conversation is always kept to a minimum. The books that Rodriguez brought home are the epitome of Rodriguez's imaginative, scholarship boy. They are books that disassociate himself from his family. This loneliness also proves true in Rodriguez's student life. There seemed to be a barrier between Rodriguez and a normal, social life. Instead of healthily interacting with other people, he hid behind his books. When Rodriguez was a graduate student, he traveled to London to write a dissertation on English Renaissance literature. He found himself in a lonely community of other scholarship children whose “eyes turned away the moment [their] glances accidentally met.” (579). The realization of such a life had a profound effect on Rodriguez. Nostalgia

started setting in, and he was eager to remember the warmth he experienced as a child.

Rodriguez blatantly states that he was the quintessential scholarship boy, but I believe that he has since then shed the label. A scholarship boy is defined by Hoggart as a child who tries to separate himself from his family because of the embarrassment of association. He is the "odd man out." (848). However the tone used by Rodriguez in "The Achievement of Desire" is more nostalgic and melancholy than embarrassed. Rodriguez openly writes about his past, even though it had taken him over "twenty years to admit." (564). Hoggart claims that once a scholarship boy has made the transition into a scholar, he will never feel a sense of belonging in his personal, private life. This is where the separation between Hoggart's scholarship boy and Rodriguez truly begins. In the ending paragraphs of his essay, Rodriguez begins to identify with his parents. He notes that he "laughed just like [his] mother" and "[his] father's eyes were much like [his] own." (580). Although Rodriguez is most likely still the odd man out in his family, he does feel a sense of belonging despite the strained relationship.

There is an interesting relationship between Rodriguez and Hoggart's texts. The structure of Rodriguez's essay is formatted similar to a reading analysis worksheet. Rodriguez borrows four block quotes from Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and comments on them, finding various parallels to his own life. An example of this can be seen when Hoggart writes, "[The scholarship boy] discovers a technique of apparent learning, of acquiring of facts rather than of the handling and use of facts. He learns how to receive a purely literate education, one using only a small part of the personality and challenging

only a limited area of his being.” (577). Like Hoggart's scholarship boy, Rodriguez admits he was a bad student. He relied on imitation to get him through the grammar school system. Rodriguez “use[d] his [teachers'] diction, trusting their every direction.” (566). He adopted what he was told to adopt rather than making decisions on his own. Rodriguez's way of paralleling his life to the life of Hoggart's scholarship boy seems like a very systematic way of writing, which is interesting, because it reflects Rodriguez's methodical, educational upbringing. However, how Rodriguez uses the text to his advantage is proof that he is no longer a carbon copy of Hoggart's scholarship boy.

The text is broken up into four sections. The first section intertwines the words of Hoggart and Rodriguez describing Rodriguez's claim on the term “scholarship boy.” Rodriguez blurs the lines between Hoggart and himself, which allows him to fully align himself with Hoggart's definition of a scholarship boy. The passage from *The Uses of Literacy* within this section seems to flow a little too perfectly. It is seamlessly sewn together as if Hoggart's words and Rodriguez's personality are one and the same. The second section could have easily been ripped out of Rodriguez's journal, because of its heavy use of personal events from the essayist's life. The second section's polar opposite is the third section, which seems very factual and based on Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Many of the sentences begin with “The scholarship boy...” The second and third sections display some kind of internal battle within Rodriguez, but it comes together in the fourth section. Instead of reading Hoggart's text like a chore and adding it to a list of accomplishments like Rodriguez did with Plato's *The Republic*, he

comprehends and uses it to aid his voice. He controls the last section with great authority. Rodriguez makes Hoggart's words work for him and becomes both a close reader and a creator of a literate, personal, and admirable essay. He uses Hoggart's words, but he does not mimic them like he once mimicked his teachers and critics.

Being able to find his own voice as both a reader and reader, as well as becoming aware and accepting of the fact that it is okay to desire the past were key to separating Rodriguez from Hoggart's prescriptive scholarship boy. Rodriguez even goes as far to describe Hoggart's scholarship boy as "more accurate than fair." (577). Although it is a seemingly an accurate description, of what a young, working-class child may go through in life, it is not every man's description. The scholarship boy described by Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* seemed to have an ill fate of seclusion and loneliness, but Rodriguez seems to have created a different ending for himself by being able to go back home. The last section of "The Achievement of Desire" proves that the essay is solely Rodriguez's. He may have inserted Hoggart's quotes into his work, yet the essay is still his, because the clarity of his emotions and thoughts is pristine.

Rodriguez, Richard. "The Achievement of Desire." *Ways of Reading*. Comp. David Bartholomae

and Anthony Petrosky. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005. 561-584.