

ENGLISH 50 FINAL EXAM, FALL 2003

"The Quiet Hour" by Robert Mayer

What would you consider an ideal family evening? Call me a romantic, but that question calls up in my mind pictures of parents and children lingering around the dinner table to cozily discuss the day's events; munching popcorn from a common bowl as they engage in the friendly competition of a board game; or perhaps strolling through their neighborhood on an early summer evening, stopping to chat with friends in their yards.

Let me tell you what "an ideal family evening" does not conjure up for me: the image of a silent group of people – the intimate word "family" seems hardly to apply – bathed in the faint blue light of a television screen that barely illuminates their glazed eyes and slack jaws.

Yet we all know that such a scenario is the typical one. I would like to suggest a different scenario. I propose that for sixty to ninety minutes each evening, right after the early-evening news, all television broadcasting in the United States be prohibited by law. Let us pause for a moment while the howls of protest subside.

Now let us take a serious, reasonable look at what the results might be if such a proposal were adopted.

New Explorations

Without the distraction of the tube, families might sit around together after dinner and actually talk to one another. It is a byword in current psychology that many of our emotional problems – everything, in fact, from the generation gap to the soaring divorce rate to some forms of mental illness – are caused at least in part by failure to communicate. We do not tell each other what is bothering us. Resentments build. The result is an emotional explosion of one kind or another. By using the quiet family hour to discuss our problems, we might get to know each other better, and to like each other better.

On evenings when such talk is unnecessary, families could rediscover more active pastimes. Freed from the chains of the tube, forced to find their own diversions, they might take a ride together to watch the sunset. Or they might take a walk together (remember feet?) and explore the neighborhood with fresh, innocent eyes.

Pros and Cons

With time to kill and no TV to slay it for them, children and adults alike might rediscover reading. There is more entertainment and intellectual nourishment in a decent book than in a month of typical TV programming. Educators report that the generation growing up under television can barely write an English sentence, even at the college level. Writing is often learned from reading. A more literate new generation could be a major by-product of the quiet hour.

A different form of reading might also be dug up from the past: reading aloud. Few pastimes bring a family closer together than gathering around and listening to Mother or Father read a good story.

It has been forty years since my mother read to me, a chapter a night, from *Tom Sawyer*. After four decades, the whitewashing of the fence, Tom and Becky in the cave, Tom at his own funeral remain more vivid in my mind than any show I have ever seen on TV.

When the quiet hour ends, the networks might even be forced to come up with better shows in order to lure us back from our newly discovered diversions.

Now let us look at the other side of the proposal. What are the negatives?

At a time when "big government" is becoming a major political bugaboo, a television-free hour created by law would be attacked as further intrusion by the government on people's lives. But that would not be the case. Television stations already must be federally licensed. A simple regulation making TV licenses invalid for sixty to ninety minutes each evening would hardly be a major violation of individual freedom.

It will be argued that every television set ever made has an "off" knob; that any family that wants to sit down and talk, or go for a drive, or listen to music, or read a book need only switch off the set, without interfering with the freedom of others to watch. That is a strong, valid argument – in theory. But in practice, it doesn't hold up. Twenty-five years of saturation television have shown us the hypnotic lure of the tube. Television viewing tends to expand to fill the available time. What's more, what is this "freedom to watch" of which we would be deprived? It is the freedom to watch three or four quiz shows and mediocre sitcoms. That's all. In practice, the quiet hour would not limit our freedom; it would expand it. It would revitalize a whole range of activities that have wasted away in the consuming glare of the tube.

A Radical Notion?

Economically, the quiet hour would produce screams of outrage from the networks, which would lose an hour or so of prime-time advertising revenues; and from the sponsors, who would have that much less opportunity to peddle us deoderants and hemorrhoid preparations while we are trying to digest our dinners. But given the vast sums the networks waste on such pompous drivel as almost any of the TV "mini-series," I'm sure they could make do. The real question is, how long are we going to keep passively selling our own and our children's souls to keep Madison Avenue on Easy Street?

At first glance, the notion of a TV-less hour seems radical. What will parents do without the electronic baby-sitter? How will we spend the quiet? But it is not radical at all. It has been only about thirty-five years since television came to dominate American free time. Those of us forty-five and older can remember television-free childhoods, spent partly with the radio – which at least involved the listener's imagination – but also with reading, learning, talking, playing games, inventing new diversions, creating fantasylands.

It wasn't that difficult. Honest.

The truth is, we had a ball.

Fall 2003

Instructor _____

English 50 Final Exam

General Instructions

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus.

Print your instructor's name in the upper right corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of "The Quiet Hour" along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your exam.

Essay Format

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

Prompt

"The Quiet Hour"

In this article, Robert Mayer proposes that television be outlawed for an hour or so each night after dinner. He suggests that if families spent less time watching television together, they might spend more time talking, going on family outings, or even reading together. He also argues that we could all benefit intellectually from less television watching and more reading. Some might agree with Mayer that a television-free hour might be beneficial while others might be skeptical about such a plan, reluctant to give up their television time, considering it to be a source of news, entertainment, relaxation, pleasure, and even, perhaps, family togetherness. Write an essay in which you explain either the benefits or drawbacks of turning off that television for sixty to ninety minutes each night after dinner. Focus on one or the other, not both.

Final Note

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.