

<b>EAE 0422 A</b>	
Code Sujet	EHP
Sujet Jury	
Sujet Candidat	
Page	1 / 5

I write this on the beach. Let us say, then, that I am a writer on the beach. It was once considered bad manners to admit anything of the sort, just as people walking to and from the bathroom were supposed to be invisible; but this is a rude age. Nothing is hidden. Yet everything is. In a sense a person *observed* walking to a closed door is *less* 'there' than someone being  
5 forcibly imagined to be invisible.

I sit opposite the sea.\* Its receding green surface is marked everywhere by millions of depressions, or nicks, of an uncertain colour: much as this page is marked. But this page yields a meaning, however slowly, whereas the marks on the sea are everywhere the same. That is the difference between Art and Nature.

10 But the marks on the sea move, which is somehow portentous. And large distinctions in tone are perceptible: the purple shadows of clouds from above, of coral reefs from below; and the horizon is darker than the middle distance - almost black - and the water near me is tinted with the white of the sand underneath, so that its clear deep-throated green is made delicate, acidulous, artificial. And I seem to see, now and then, running vertically with no regard for perspective, veins  
15 of a metallic colour; filaments of silver or gold - it is impossible to be certain which - waver elusively, but valuably, at an indeterminate distance below the skin of the massive, flat monotonous volume.

Enough, surely. It is a chronic question, whether to say simply 'the sea' and trust to people's imaginations, or whether to put in the adjectives. I have had *only* fair luck with people's  
20 imaginations; hence tend to trust adjectives. But are they to be trusted? Are they - words - anything substantial upon which we can rest our weight? The best writers say so. Sometimes I believe it. But the illogic of the belief bothers me: From whence did words gather this intrinsic potency? The source of language, the spring from which all these shadows (tinted, alliterative, shapely, but still shadows) flow, is itself in shadow.

25 But what, then, am I to do? Here am I, a writer, and there is the sea, a subject. For mathematical purity, let us exclude everything else - the sky, the clouds, the sand on my elbows, the threat of my children coming down the beach to join me. Let us posit a world of two halves: the ego and the external object. I think it is a fair representation of the world, a kind of biform Parliament, where two members sit, and speak for all parties. Tell me what I must do. Or rather,  
30 give me my excuse; for my vote is foreordained, it must be in opposition, and our Parliament will be stalemated until one of us dies.

The incantor of tales about the cave fire was excused by the hungry glitter\*\* of eyes. Homer swung his tides on this momentum. Aeschylus felt excused; Sophocles heroically bluffed out any doubt; with Euripides we definitely arrive at the sudden blankness, the embarrassed slapping of the  
35 pockets, the slammer, the flustered prolixity. But then a splendid excuse appeared, it seemed eternally. Dante had it. Milton. Tolstoy, Dickens, Balzac picked its bones. It was a huge creature and still gives some nourishment. Shakespeare and Dr Johnson lived on money; it was a hearty diet, but is no longer considered hygienic. Beauty, said Keats. A trick of optics. Self, said Wordsworth and Goethe. A tautology. Reality, said the Realists, and the Opposition swamped them

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\* The Caribbean - hence its idyllic aspect

\*\* Why were they hungry? Is there a narrative appetite as profound as the sexual? Why would Nature put it there? But then, why does Nature do half the things she does?

Code Sujet	EHP
Page	2 / 5

40 with pamphlets. I bore you. Even this raises an issue. Is it my duty not to bore you; my excuse,  
that I do not? This would bring me safely into the cosy hotel of pornographers, dinner guests, and  
television personalities. But you would be truly amazed, how indignantly I, the peer of the  
immense sea, reject such shelter. Forgive me; I know you made the offer with warm hearts. To  
continue my story - Conrad and James offer Groping. As An End In Itself, and Proust and Joyce  
45 round out the tale with a magnificent cacophony of superb effects. I may, in this summation, have  
left out a few names, which you yourself can supply. The remaining question of interest: were  
Proust and Joyce an ending or a beginning? They seemed, from their newness, a beginning, but as  
time passes does not their continued newness make it clear that they are the opposite, that  
everything since comprises a vacuum in which the surfaces of these old works, that should be  
SD cracked and sunken, are preserved like fresh pigment?

How tired I am! All my intricate manoeuvres, my loudly applauded and widely reprinted  
perorations, my passionate lobbying - all my stratagems are exhausted. I am near death. And the  
Opposition seems as young as ever. You see, he never exerts himself. The clerks - all the quick  
clerks have gone over to his side; I am left with but a few ancient men, hanging on for the pension  
55 - elicit his answers to prepared questionnaires, which he gives very reluctantly, with much coaxing.  
He never gets up on his feet and says a word the gallery can hear. Yet more and more his influence  
spreads among them. Oh, they still muster a few handclaps for my most gallant efforts, bent and  
breathless as I am; but it is his power they respect. Out with this metaphor - take away these  
congressional trappings ! There. I still have some power of my own. His silence can still be twisted  
60 to my advantage.

John Updike, "The Sea's Great Sameness," [1960] in *Museums and Women and Other  
Stories*, 1973.

Code Sujet	EHP
Page	3 / 5

In colonial times, everyone knew about the plague. Even before the *Mayflower* sailed, King James of England gave thanks to "Almighty God in his great goodness and bounty towards us" for sending "this wonderful plague among the salvages [*sic*]." Two hundred years later the oldest American history in my collection—J.W. Barber's *Interesting Events in the History of the United States*, published in 1829—still recalled the plague.

A few years before the arrival of the Plymouth settlers, a very mortal sickness raged with great violence among the Indians inhabiting the eastern parts of New England. "Whole towns were depopulated. The living were not able to bury the dead; and their bodies were found lying above ground; many years after. The Massachusetts Indians are said to have been reduced from 30,000 to 300 righting men. In 1633, the small pox swept off great numbers."

Today it is no surprise that not one in a hundred of my college students has ever heard of the plague. Unless they have read *Life and Liberty*, students could scarcely come away from these books thinking of Indians as people who made an impact on North America, who lived here in considerable numbers, who *settled*, in short, and were then killed by disease or arms. Textbook authors have retreated from the candor of Barber.

Having mistreated the plague, the textbooks proceed to mistreat the Pilgrims. Their arrival in Massachusetts poses another historical controversy that textbook authors take pains to duck. The textbooks say the Pilgrims intended to go to Virginia, where there existed a British settlement already. But "the little party on the *Mayflower*," explains *American History*, "never reached Virginia. On November 9, they sighted land on Cape Cod." How did the Pilgrims wind up in Massachusetts when they set out for Virginia? "Violent storms blew their ship off course," according to some textbooks; others blame an "error in navigation." Both explanations may be wrong. Some historians believe the Dutch bribed the captain of the *Mayflower* to sail north so the Pilgrims would not settle near New Amsterdam. Others hold that the Pilgrims went to Cape Cod on purpose.

Bear in mind that the Pilgrims numbered only about 35 of the 102 settlers aboard the *Mayflower*; the rest were ordinary folk seeking their fortunes in the new Virginia colony. George Willison has argued that the Pilgrim leaders, wanting to be far from Anglican control, never planned to settle in Virginia. They had debated the relative merits of Guiana, in South America, versus the Massachusetts coast, and, according to Willison, they intended a hijacking.

Certainly the Pilgrims already knew quite a bit about what Massachusetts could offer them, from the fine fishing along Cape Cod to that "wonderful plague," which offered an unusual opportunity for British settlement. According to some historians, Squamo, an Indian from the village of Pauixet, Massachusetts, had provided Ferdinando Gorges, a leader of the Plymouth Company in England, with a detailed description of the area. Gorges may even have sent Squamo and Capt. Thomas Dermer as advance men to wait for the Pilgrims, although Dermer sailed away when the Pilgrims were delayed in England. In any event, the Pilgrims were familiar with the area's topography. Recently published maps that Samuel de Champlain had drawn when he had toured the area in 1605 supplemented the information that had been passed on by sixteenth-century explorers. John Smith had studied the region and named it "New England" in 1614, and he even offered to guide the Pilgrim leaders. They rejected his services as too expensive and carried his guidebook along instead.

These considerations prompt me to believe that the Pilgrim leaders probably ended up in Massachusetts on purpose. But evidence for any conclusion is soft. Some historians believe Gorges took credit for landing in Massachusetts after the fact. Indeed, the *Mayflower* may have had no specific destination. Readers might be fascinated if textbook authors presented two or more of the various possibilities, but, as usual, exposing students to historical controversy is taboo. Each textbook picks just one reason and presents it as fact.

Only one of the twelve textbooks adheres to the hijacking possibility. "The New England landing came as a rude surprise for the bedraggled and tired [non-Pilgrim] majority on board the *Mayflower*," says *Land of Promise*. "[They] had joined the expedition seeking economic opportunity in the Virginia tobacco plantations." Obviously, these passengers were not happy at having been

Code Sujet	EHP
Page	4 / 5

taken elsewhere, especially to a shore with no prior English settlement to join. "Rumors of mutiny spread quickly." *Promise* then ties this unrest to the Mayflower Compact, giving its readers a fresh interpretation of why the colonists adopted the agreement and why it was so democratic: "To avoid  
 55 rebellion, the Pilgrim leaders made a remarkable concession to the other colonists. They issued a call for every male on board, regardless of religion or economic status, to join in the creation of a 'civil body politic.'" The compact achieved its purpose: the majority acquiesced.

Actually, the hijacking hypothesis does not show the Pilgrims in such a bad light. The compact provided a graceful solution to an awkward problem. Although hijacking and false  
 60 representation doubtless were felonies then as now, the colony did survive with a lower death rate than Virginia, so no permanent harm was done. The whole story places the Pilgrims in a somewhat dishonorable light, however, which may explain why only one textbook selects it.

The "navigation error" story lacks plausibility: the one parameter of ocean travel that sailors could and did measure accurately in that era was latitude—distance north or south from the  
 65 equator. The "storms" excuse is perhaps still less plausible, for if a storm blew them off course, when the weather cleared they could have turned southward again, sailing out to sea to bypass any shoals. They had plenty of food and beer, after all. But storms and pilot error leave the Pilgrims pure of heart, which may explain why the other eleven textbooks choose one of the two.

Regardless of motive, the Mayflower Compact provided a democratic basis for the Plymouth  
 70 colony. Since the framers of our Constitution in fact paid the compact little heed, however, it hardly deserves the attention textbook authors lavish on it. But textbook authors clearly want to package the Pilgrims as a pious and moral band who laid the antecedents of our democratic traditions. Nowhere is this motive more embarrassingly obvious than in John Garraty's *American History*. "So far as any record shows, this was the first time in human history that a group of people consciously  
 75 created a government where none had existed before." Here Garraty paraphrases a Forefathers' Day speech, delivered in Plymouth in 1802, in which John Adams celebrated "the only instance in human history of that positive, original social compact." George Willison has dryly noted that Adams was "blinking several salient facts — above all, the circumstances that prompted the compact, which was plainly an instrument of minority rule." Of course, Garraty's paraphrase also  
 80 exposes his ignorance of the Republic of Iceland, the Iroquois Confederacy, and countless other polities antedating 1620. Such an account simply invites students to become ethnocentric.

In their pious treatment of the Pilgrims, history textbooks introduce the archetype of American exceptionalism. According to *The American Pageant*, "This rare opportunity for a great  
 85 social and political experiment may never come again." *The American Way* declares, "The American people have created a unique nation." How is America exceptional? Surely we're exceptionally good. As Woodrow Wilson put it, "America is the only idealistic nation in the world." And the goodness started at Plymouth Rock, according to our textbooks, which view the Pilgrims as Christian, sober, democratic, generous to the Indians, God-thanking. Such a happy portrait can be painted only by omitting the facts about the plague, the possible hijacking, and the Indian  
 90 relations.

For that matter, our culture and our textbooks underplay or omit Jamestown and the sixteenth-century Spanish settlements in favor of Plymouth Rock as the archetypal birthplace of the United States. Virginia, according to T.H. Breen, "ill-served later historians in search of the mythic  
 95 origins of American culture." Historians could hardly tout Virginia as moral in intent; in the words of the first history of Virginia written by a Virginian: "The chief Design of all Parties concern'd was to fetch away the Treasure from thence, aiming more at sudden Gain, than to form any regular Colony."

James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me. Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, New York: The New Press, 1995



Raphaëlle Peale (1774-1825) [male painter], *Venus Rising From the Sea – A Deception (After The Bath)*  
Oil on canvas 1823, 74.3cm x 61.3cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Missouri)