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*Creative Dom vs. Comma Coffee*

As I sit in a faux-leather gaming chair, eyes pasted to this screen, I drift to the far-gone reality of high school. Six years and a lifetime ago, I endured one of the heftiest challenges to my junior career: American Literature. I had no trouble coughing up enough relevant details to pass assignments. Twain, James Fenimore Cooper, and Washington Irving were not complicated. What made the class difficult was how our teacher, Mrs. Coffee, graded comma usage.

My now-fiance Jessica and I competed for the highest grade in this class. We seized every opportunity to squeeze an extra point or two from our assignments (I ended up winning because she took a night off with friends and missed an assignment, but that is neither here nor there). Mrs. Coffee returned every essay with the same feedback. A grade far lower than deserved, and a note, “fix comma splices.” This dread phrase haunted every corner of my mind. I began to restructure sentences to avoid the usage of commas entirely. Even one fearful jot out of place was met with a scornful slash of red ink. Like her college professors, Mrs. Coffee would dock an entire letter grade for every poorly placed comma. It was at this time that my creative side rebelled. An all-out war against conventional grammatical structures began in my mind and became a dominant theme in later rhetoric. My poems and short stories became wild, seeking to challenge or destroy all English rules that dared oppose them.

Looking back, I understand the reason for my insurgence. Mrs. Coffee excelled at finding and punishing comma splice errors. However, she failed to give reasonable explanations for

doing so. As a result, I never learned the actual rules governing comma usage. Instead, I glumly received the lash of the red pen time and time again until I abandoned commas permanently. High school English gave the impression that English rules were an unattainable ideal. Much like the Golden Rule, grammatical structures were revered and followed to the best of our mortal ability, never to be understood.

This was my mindset when I first joined our ENGL 4300 class. I would never have attended if it was not required for a certificate. I arrived on the first day expecting a dour classroom filled with mundane exercises. I hoped to pass with a B and purge the whole experience from my mind immediately after. There are two kinds of students in an advanced grammar class: those who love grammar and those who feel that grammar is some sort of necessary evil, a constant surer than death and taxes for the successful writer. Before this class, I fell squarely into the second camp. I partnered with people who loved grammar because I wanted to pass the course. However, I also tried to understand them. Why did they like grammar so much? Was there any way this antiquated structure could still be viable?

As I learned more about the rules of comma usage, I began to agree with their position. Like math, grammar provides a structure that any aspiring writer can use for success. Knowing precisely why a specific sentence is phrased a certain way is comforting. It has deepened my appreciation of writing and editing. I know how much effort it takes to maintain grammatically correct work. As I read, the syntax of a sentence has much greater significance. Where commas are positioned in a sentence drastically changes its meaning. Most importantly, I realized that excellent grammar enhances writing more often than it detracts.

The most important thing I have learned is that grammar is essential to creative writing. I know this is ironic. A style of writing that defies all conditions should not need any format.

However, in fiction, the world, characters, and everything else spring straight from the head of the author. The created reality must contain a familiar structure on some intrinsic level to make sense to an audience. For example, a fantasy novel includes several items the reader may consider abnormal but still enjoy. These items could consist of flying trees, angry elves, or sentient hockey pucks. However, the story falls apart if the main characters do not have convincing backgrounds, morals, or relationships. They must be relatable to the reader in some way. The common ground for most readers is the acceptable use of the English language. It is no accident that Tolkien, a linguist, wrote one of the greatest stories of all time. Knowing how language is used allows the author to immerse readers into their world more effectively.

The first assignment for this class was to write about our current experience with grammar. I wrote an honest negative review. However, as the course has gone on, I have enjoyed the more valuable aspects of grammar. Commas have been patiently and humorously explained, and I am not afraid of them anymore. I learned how to employ them successfully. With the help of Dr. Mitchell and my classmate Danielle, I waded through the turgid swamp of information, gleaning truth nuggets along the way. I have found that exercises and class practice are the best ways to become familiar with comma usage. Through them, I have conquered my deep-seated fear of commas. However, I do not think I will ever get over my phobia of red ink.