

A Closer Look

Then I was seized with an idea: I would copy out my favourite passages from Ursule Mirouet, word for word....It was the first time in my life that I had felt any desire to copy sentences from a book. I ransacked the room for paper, but all I could find was a few sheets of notepaper intended for letters to our parents....I decided I would write directly onto the inside of my sheepskin coat.

Dai Sijie Balzac & the Little Chinese Seamstress

In your luckiest moments of reading, it seems to me, what you find is something to keep quiet about. You find something to hoard. You come upon one of those inexplicable places in a book that touches you so deeply you don't even have the words to say why. And you should not have to. These places belong to you. Others can just go find their own.

Suzanne Freeman American Scholar Winter 2005.

My original goal in beginning this project was to look more closely at the entries in my Commonplace Book in order to determine what they might reveal about the central concerns of my life. It was planned in the manner of any self-analysis. The passages were never selected with the expectation that I or anyone else would one day embark on this task. As a result they convey a relatively “unbiased” view of the beliefs and feelings that seemed significant to me at the time they were chosen.¹

¹ In the language of social researchers they constituted a non-reactive measure, one taken when individuals are not aware they are being studied. Under these conditions, it is assumed that they behave the way they truly feel since they are not trying to please the experimenter, confirm his hypothesis, or behave in a normative fashion.

I thought that by looking at them closely, I might obtain a deeper understanding of myself and the issues that I have been preoccupied with over the course of my reading life.

I realize that this presentation may be of little interest to anyone but myself or that the data that I present have any degree of generality. While it may have the appearance of social science research, it is, in fact, a case study in which I have applied a simple method of measurement in an informal study of my own Commonplace Book. Perhaps this presentation will suggest an approach that other individuals who keep a commonplace book might find useful. It is within this framework that I invite readers to view the results of my own analysis.

At the outset I thought it would be interesting to make note of the type of material that I drew upon in creating my Commonplace Book. Table 5 compares the

Non-Fiction	
Periodical*	61
Non-Fiction Book	36
Fiction	
Short Story	24
Verse	16
Fiction Book	102
Drama	2
Total Fiction	145
Total Non-Fiction	97
Total	242
Note: "Periodical" refers to any non-fiction essay, interview, reflection, memoir, or profile.	

number of Fiction and Non-Fiction works that I read over the years that I have been collecting passages. Of the total (N = 242) separate works I read, Fiction dominates the selections with approximately two-thirds (N= 145) drawn from this genre, with the majority represented by contemporary rather than classical novels (N = 102). The remaining selections were drawn from non-fiction sources (N = 97) with almost two-thirds of these from literary periodicals (N = 61).

Rather than wade through every one of the almost three hundred pages of my Commonplace Book, I decided to simplify the task somewhat by classifying a representative sample of passages. I began with the first block of thirty-five pages. Then I skipped the following thirty pages, then classified those on the next thirty-five pages, skipped the next thirty, and so on until the end. This yielded five separate blocks of thirty five pages each in which I attempted to classify the selections I have copied over the past twenty years.

It was not always easy to decide how to classify a passage. This was especially true for the Briefs, but sometimes also for the longer passages, and the Quotes. Some were rather enigmatic and I could not reconstruct why I had made note of them in the first place, as in: *Whole lot of heavy thinking going on out there*. Others were brief phrases or collections of colorful words without any general meaning that I could detect, such as *Manny's car wash blues...* Still others were simply unclassifiable because they were vague or difficult to interpret: *It's like a swamp-- there are these mangrove trees growing out of it that are quite amazing*.

I often copy a passage because it is clever or humorous but on review, I could not find any conceptual basis to classify them in this study, such as this passage from an essay by Anthony Lane in the *New Yorker*:

Is there some law that prevents Tom Hanks from winning the Oscar for the Best Actor forever? The answer is yes. There is such a law. It is the law of the three-year limit, otherwise known as the Iron Law of StardomThere is no penalty for breaking this law, for the simple reason that it is unbreakable....This is the true a priori, the reality that explains all other realities.

Similarly a number of passages were written so beautifully and so artfully that they almost commanded a mark in the margin but did not readily lend themselves to classification.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulder, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year...²

But by and large most of the passages, especially the longer ones, conveyed a clear and coherent idea that fell into one of the themes that emerged as I went along from page to page.

To get a sense of my scheme, I will briefly define each of the twelve most frequently occurring categories and present an example, along with its source. These categories were selected because they met an arbitrary criterion of at least thirty citations out of the 1,115 that I recorded. Each of the illustrative examples

² Ernest Hemingway *A Farewell to Arms*.

has been taken from what was, at the time I undertook the analysis in June of 2005, the last set of passages.

Literature: Citations that treat poetry, fiction, and non-fiction as well as descriptions of the reading experience, specific authors, and the relationship between literature and life.

A novel like poetry, can be more or less insightful, more or less profound. It can certainly be more or less moving. It can even be moral or immoral. But, being fiction, it cannot be true or false in the way that an empirical proposition is true or false.

Eliot Pearlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Romance: Expressions of love, romantic feelings, and devotion to another person, including a spouse, lover or muse.

In the ten years since the car crash took her from him, he had cherished her more than while she was alive. Julius sometimes heaved with despair when he thought of how his lush contentment with Miriam, the true idyllic soaring moments of life, had come and gone without his fully grasping them....He knew also that no other woman would ever really matter to him.

Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Learning: The pleasure and importance of scholarly life and one devoted to research, critical reflection, and analysis.

...just don't imagine life as a complete learned man to be too delightful...It is a tiring, troublesome life full of work; only the delight in doing it gives it its charm. One doesn't get rich with it...

Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Change: *Statements that describe the factors that are most likely to lead to a change in a person's beliefs and behaviors and the results of various influence techniques.*

The people who can make a bold move at a given moment are those who are not constrained economically, culturally or socially. That's why those who grew up in the elite and have the power to impact things have a responsibility to change the face of society.

Ronit Chacham, *Breaking Ranks*

Writing: *Characterizations of the writing life, its difficulties and importance, including references to particular writing routines and how one learns to write more effectively.*

It [Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*] made a strong impression: that one could write with such apparent simplicity of the daily complications and pain of a usual existence, a baffled sensibility.

Shirley Hazzard, *Paris Review* #173, Interview

Age: *The effects of growing older, how others perceive and treat the aged, and how one confronts the increasing problems of old age.*

She's probably no older than me. In fact, she's my future—the wart, the walker, the wheelchair. As she came closer, he heard her mumbling.

Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Self: How we come to know ourselves, the effect we have on others, and the nature of personal identity, as well as differences between the private and public self.

She moved in a manner that suggested she was completely comfortable in her skin.

Elliot Pearlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Relationships: a description of the way in which two or more people are linked to one another or an expression about how one feels about the nature of relationships with other people.

In our friendship we were able to share our private thoughts and ideas, to test them upon one another, in a way that would have been impossible had we been linked more closely by ties which, paradoxically enough, separate more profoundly than they join, though human illusion forbids us to believe this.

Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

Marriage: Descriptions of the marital experience, including its joys and limitations, and the course of a marital relationship over time.

What a feat of social engineering to shoehorn an entire citizenry (minus the occasional straggler) into such uniform household arrangements, all because everyone knows that true love demands it and that any reluctance to participate signals an insufficiency of love.

Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic*

Alienation: Expressions of isolation, despair, depression and general sense of melancholy, including death and dying.

I was just not cut out for the business of living at a time like this, a time when wondering, caring, dreaming...they were just not selling, they were uncool, unhip, not sexy, past their expiration ate...Some other time maybe.

Elliot Pearlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Understanding: Statements about explanation in general, the search for truth, and how to most effectively arrive at some degree of knowledge or insight about a person or event

...statistical probabilities aren't the same as truths.

Ian McEwan, *Saturday*

Solitude: The emotional and intellectual experience of being alone, its effects and value, as well as particular examples of a solitary life and why individuals seek it.

...the less I have to do with people, the happier I am. When I tried living in life, I was drawn into agitation. To stay out of life, to want nothing and to expect nothing, to keep myself engaged in elevated contemplative pursuits—that is the path, my only path, to peace.

Elliot Pearlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

After I had completed classifying the passages, I indexed each block of thirty-five pages by category the page number in the Commonplace Book where it appeared. This provided a tally of the frequency of each category for that block and then, after

combining the data for each block, an overall picture of my record keeping-activity.

The pyramid in Figure 1 displays the sixty different categories that emerged in this analysis in terms of the frequency of their occurrence. Some of the categories were

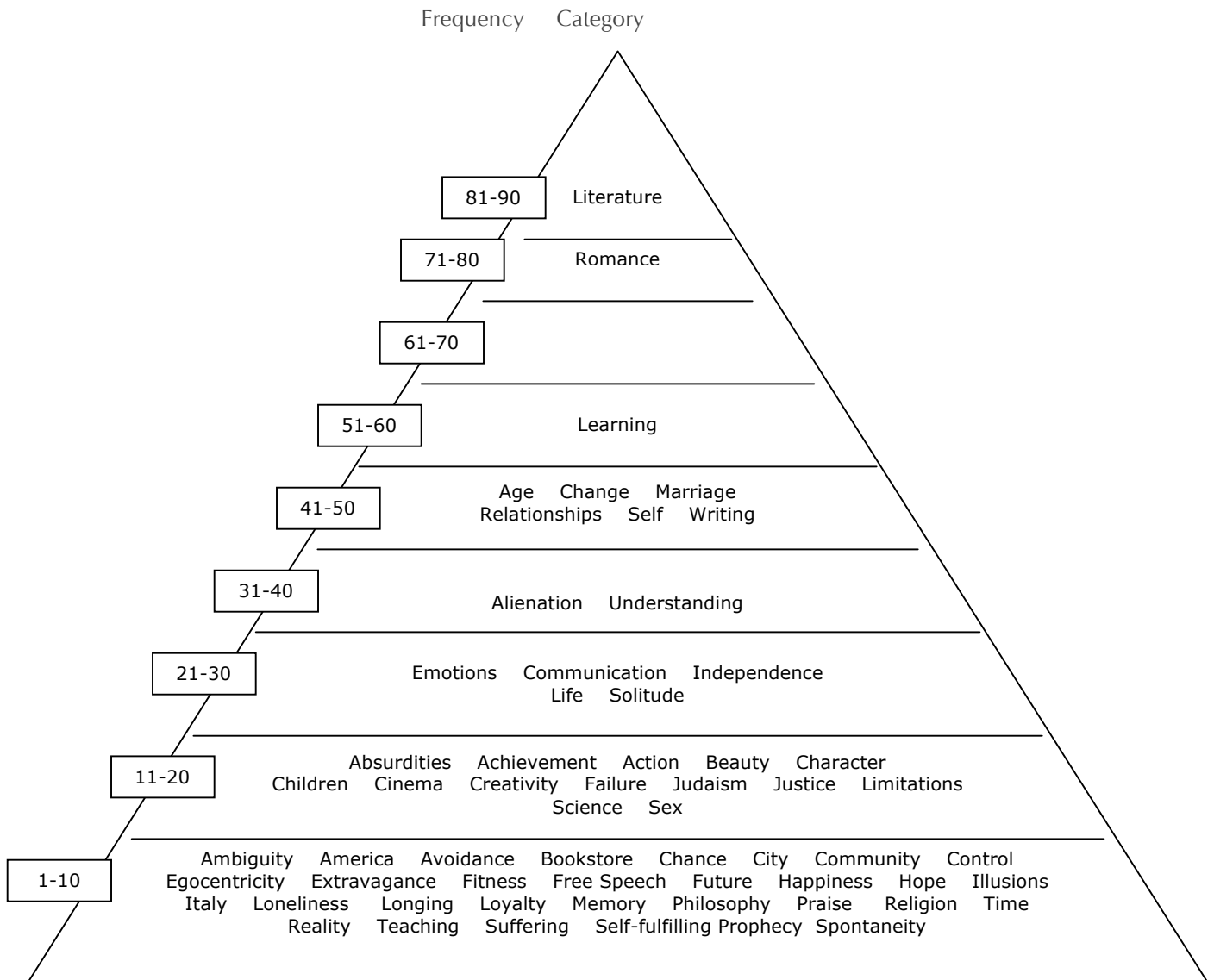


Figure 1: Indicates the approximate frequency of each category, as shown in the boxes on the left edge for each category shown in the center section of the pyramid with those at the apex the most frequent and those at the base the least.

rarely noted. For example, I recorded only one expression of Hope, and three of Ambiguity, Happiness, Philosophy and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. I noted the concept Loyalty nine times, although it appeared in only one document.³

Additional categories with at least 15 citations included Action (as distinguished from belief), Beauty, Character, Children, Communication, Emotions, Failure, Morality, and Life (ordinary daily activities and/or struggles).

Taken together the most frequently cited categories represented slightly more than 50% of all the recorded classifications in this analysis. This leaves open the question of whether this was the result of a certain uniformity in my classifying procedure or the nature of the reading material itself which was no doubt chosen, in part, because it dealt with those topics.

In general there was considerable consistency in the highest-ranking categories for each block of recorded pages. Both Literature and Romance were among the most frequent in each of the five blocks, while Change, Learning and Age appeared in all but one. Two others, Marriage and Self, were in the most frequent list in all but two of the five blocks. I had anticipated that the themes might vary both in their content and frequency over time so that those I was most likely to choose in the beginning would not be the same twenty years later. But this was not the case, as the category frequencies remained relatively constant throughout this period. And on reflection this doesn't surprise me after all. I am still the same bookish student and incurable romantic that I have always been, even long before I began transcribing passages from the books that I read.

³ The End of Loyalty by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1998.

In Figure 2, I have summarized the frequency of the most-cited categories in my analysis. It shows, for example that Solitude was noted 30 times, while each of the remaining categories appeared increasingly more often with Literature reaching a

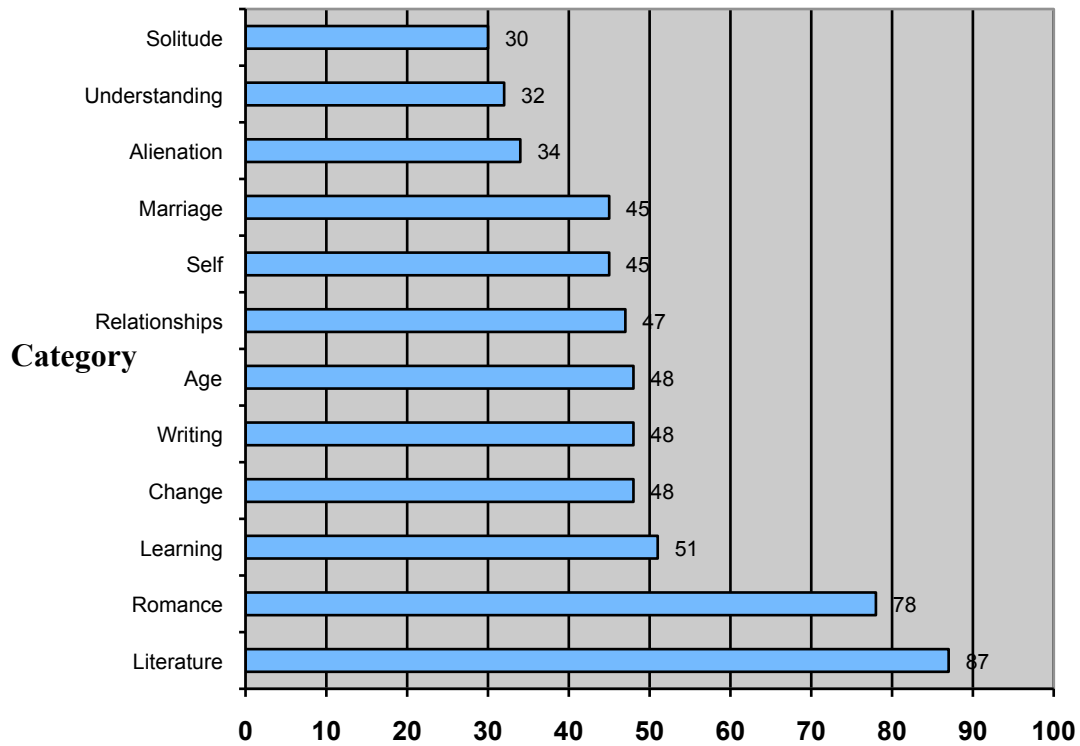


Figure 2: Displays the total frequency of each of the twelve most frequency cited categories.

value of 87, almost three times more frequent than Solitude. As documented in Figure 1 above, each of these categories still appeared considerably more often than the majority of the thirty others.

