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Ragged Dick in the Nineties

An active student learning project

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Horatio Alger, Jr.'s *Ragged Dick* is the most popular text in my syllabus for English 356 "American Texts: 1860-1920." Ours is a metropolitan university with a large population of working-class and low-income, disabled and minority, first-generation college students.

Alger's affable hero, his struggle toward "fame and fortune," and the detailed depiction of urban life has resonance for students for whom just getting to college has been a struggle, as well as piquancy: their life experience suggests that "moral capitalism"¹ no longer operates, if indeed it ever did, but they know they must act as if it did if they are to have any chance at all of getting ahead.

As a mild-mannered Marxist with a long-standing commitment to helping students see how literature abets or challenges the hegemony, I teach *Ragged Dick* with other period texts that address the relationship between character, money and success, including *Sister Carrie*, *The Song of the Lark*, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, *The Home-Maker* and *McTeague*.² As the first text of the term, *Ragged Dick* has a way of bringing the others into focus, particularly in presaging the attention of nickel-and-dime accounting so characteristic of that materialistic era and its evocation of the substratum of poverty underlying the American dream.

English 356 is a writing-intensive course required for English majors and strongly recommended for students majoring in English Education. In addition to the usual course essays and exams, I like to give my students a choice of brief independent projects emphasizing Internet or primary source research or, for education majors, development of unit plans and activities for teaching one of the texts in regular or advanced placement high school English classes.

Author's note: In this article I describe a course assignment geared toward teaching Alger's *Ragged Dick* in the context of a politicized or historicized literature course. I have had a great deal of success with this active learning approach and believe it can open the way, not only toward more inclusion of Alger and other "ephemeral" 19th century writers in contemporary curricula, but also to increasing student understanding of a culture and literature soon to be seen by them as two centuries old and, therefore, irrelevant.



Ragged Dick, an illustration appearing with the first chapter of Alger's serial in *Student and Schoolmate*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Jan. 19, 1867.

The *Ragged Dick* research assignment, which I devised soon after the Congress passed welfare reform in 1996, has proved nearly as popular as the novel. Despite its early due date (typically the third week of the term) and the necessity for some off-campus travel and creative problem-solving, about one quarter of the class routinely opts for it. I offer it here as an eye-opening exercise for students and instructors, particularly because the data and its possible interpretations may differ region to region, year to year, and student to student. The assignment itself is brief:

In the first half of the novel, Alger gives a careful accounting of Dick's shoeshine income and cost of living, including the costs of lodging on Mott Street, food, new and used clothing, hospitalization and care for Johnny Mullen's injured leg, etc. As you read *Ragged Dick*, keep

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careful track of all mention of income and expenses. then do a little research on the possibilities for a *Ragged Dick* in Dayton in the 1990s assuming no social safety net. Likely income from shoe shines? room rent? clothing? the equivalent of beefsteak and coffee breakfast? week in a hospital with treatment for leg injury? equivalent of a night at Tony Pastor's? other expenses? Don't worry about adjusting for inflation, just find out if our Dick could enjoy a lifestyle comparable to that of Dick Hunter. Arrange comparative data in tables and write a 500-750 word introduction in which you comment on the prospects for orphaned street urchins today. Attach copies of advertisements, price lists, menus, etc., from which you drew your information.

Students may need some additional guidance in the beginning, especially if they have worn running shoes all their lives. I give a list of likely locations for local shoe shine operators — the airport, Air Force base and local yuppie grocery — and suggested students search the want ads for rooming houses. Most students need no assistance locating used clothing stores and cheap food. Depending on city codes, students may need to investigate the cost of permits or booth rental, neither of which were an issue for Dick Hunter.

What my students initially find is that the going price for a regular shine in Dayton is about \$2.50, with high shines running at \$4.50 to \$5. Most conclude that if Dick worked with "energy and industry (p. 8) and performed enough high shines each day, he could indeed afford a "not particularly attractive" (p. 75) room without bath in any of several rooming houses³, eat a similarly fat-and-protein laden meal in a fast-food establishment and clothe himself serviceably from thrift stores. While my students are comfortable with the food and clothing available to Dick in the 1990s, those who actually visited the rooms they found advertised were disgusted with the squalor of a \$45 to \$50 a week squat, even in comparison with student-affordable housing, which can be pretty squalid itself.

In meeting the bare necessities both young entrepreneurs are generally equally successful, but the nineties' Dick lags behind his predecessor in "lifestyle" and health-care expectations. Second-run the dollar theaters — for our purposes the equivalent of the plays of the Old Bowery — ensure the need never to miss a night's amusement. But some students argue that today's Dick could not often enjoy hearing the latest songs sung by rising artists as at Tony Pastor's, since concert tickets at Dayton venues begin at about \$25. The more mathematically inclined point out that, while a shine today brings in 25 times as much money, a shot or glass of beer costs

125 times the 1860s price of "two cents a glass" (p. 7).

Most significantly, the nineties Dick could not help underwrite the cost of Johnny Mullen's week in the hospital, much less emergency care for his injured leg. Alger does not make clear how much of the \$3 Dick chipped in, but even if students assume it was no more than one-third (or the income from 10 shines), it's clear to them that Dick and his friends would have to shine several thousand shoes to pay Mullen's bill. Health-care costs vary wildly across the United States, and students will have to speculate about the nature of Mullen's injury, resulting in dramatically different estimates of the cost — but no matter how modest their figures, even my most socially conservative students are amazed at how inaccessible basic and emergency care have become for the working poor.

Some of my more pragmatic students have noted other drains in the nineties Dick's pocketbook. One may not legally shine shoes on street corners in our city, so Dick would need to rent space and supply a seat for his customers. Changing attitudes toward personal hygiene mean Dick would have to spend some of his earnings at the laundromat or risk losing both his customers and his space. Dayton is the fifth most dispersed urban area in the United States and none of the three popular shoe shine venues in our town are near the district where Dick could rent lodging. Dick would need to budget an additional 10 shines (\$25) per month for a bus pass and, if he held the airport concession, begin his commute no later than 6 o'clock if he wanted to catch the a.m. business commuters.

When students present their findings to the class, it sparks a lively and unpredictable discussion of Alger's novel and comparative class and economic politics in the United States from the Gilded Age to the era of diminished expectations. Since *Ragged Dick* is briefer than the majority of more canonical 19th century texts, still eminently readable and strangely current in its concerns, this assignment can easily be adapted for American history or interdisciplinary courses or for secondary school English curricula.

NOTES

1. "A Network of influences and cross-influences in which all who are in need, and who are good and industrious enough to help themselves, are given a hand on their way to the top." (Ernest 61).

2. See Loranger, "'Character and Success': Teaching *Sister Carrie* in the Contest of an On-going American Debate." *Dreiser Studies*, forthcoming summer 1999.

3. *Ragged Dick* housed himself and Fosdick on the income from 10 shines per week. The nineties Dick needs a weekly minimum of 10 high — or 18 regular shines.

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