

Dehumanization

Dehumanization

Process

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The Price is Never Too High

**A politician cannot curb the crime rate
because his methods attack the wrong problems,
but when the public clamors he is very
business-like and offers them samples
of what the real thing is like,
A man in chains, and they wait and wait
for the crime rate to drop but it never does.**

Maybe the politicians are asking the wrong questions; therefore, the wrong solutions are provided. This sentiment not only begins the discussion about correctional facilities and legislation, but also opens the door to other dialogue that is relevant to our lives today.

- **What questions should be asked?**
- **Who should be asking and of whom?**
- **Is justice just?**

Reading and writing about comparative responses builds the schema or background one has and lends itself to critical thinking, debate, and argumentative essays. The reader may wish to investigate the controversial ideology that the impetus for building prisons is often based upon the second or third grade literacy scores in a given state. This is often referred to as an urban myth, yet many news stories and articles have been written to the contrary.

- **What are the crime statistics in your area? (both adult and juvenile)**
- **Are the statistics considered valid, real; how do you know?**
- **What can society do to lessen the crime rate?**
- **Is there or could there be legislative actions that could help in some way?**

- **Is there a way you can become involved?**

These are not only questions for individuals with freedoms. If one is or has been incarcerated, consider the following:

- **Where and when did you begin to encounter problems? (connect to one's own circumstances)**
- **What could have helped you then?**
- **What can help you now?**
- **How can you help yourself?**

What thoughts does one have about any of these issues? How does this affect you? Does it affect you? **Tell your story** in conjunction with what you find through research.

Ultimately, one may ask, "What Does It Matter? We have our students read great works of literature to give them opportunity to think deeply about the issues that will affect their lives. After students are able to answer the two questions "What does it say? and "What does it mean?" (Gallagher, 2004, p. 89).

Gallagher (2004) continues to state that readers are provided practice, a life-rehearsal without consequence, and a way to explore the issues and find the relevance of the themes in literature as a whole. Story is the way in which we communicate our histories. Jimmy Santiago Baca shares his journey of enlightenment with all who choose to read it for just that reason, to provide a context for the reader to share in his story, but also to create one's own.

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They Are Humans

**It took humans to build this prison-
how many, 500? 1000?**

They *are* humans, but the questions remains:

- **Is there humanity?**
- **Does humanity exist within the prison system?**

These probing questions have the possibility to open doors that one may not have thought about without prompting. Another parallel that can be introduced here is to discuss:

- **Who resides in the prisons?**
- **Is it choice or circumstance?**

Possible Paired Reading:

“The Cold Within” (Poem) James Patrick Kenny (n.d.)

Another lesson to consider may be the use of numbers in literature/poetry. The symbolism of numbers and meanings can be seen as far back as history exists.

- **What connections can be made to numbers and writing? What connection can be made within your life?**
- **Re-read “They Are Humans.” Why were those numbers utilized?**
- **Was this usage planned or arbitrary? Although readers may never know the answer, does it really matter? Think of what they symbolize.**
- **What do numbers in a prison, a school, a university, at work represent?**
- **What *do* those numbers represent to you the reader?**
- **How do these numbers speak to you?**
- **Write utilizing the symbolism of numbers about a subject you have passion for and that can move the reader to discussion or action.**

Cross-Curricular Connections:

- If some connections are needed to explore this further, think in terms of all content areas. Mathematics is an obvious beginning.
- The numerology of the past in many ancient civilizations that lends itself to today’s math is a good beginning. One might also consider Pythagorean ideology.
- Religious connections that are seen not only in religious documents, but also in world literature.
- The use of numbers is far reaching and has significance in all societies and includes different cultural understandings.
- The numerology of myth and let’s not forget art portrayed as realistic or myth. For example, the artwork of *Ruben’s Judgment of Paris* (*Ruebens, c. 1625*) which depicts the story of Paris and the apple to the fairest woman, and the trio is shown in this intricate *artwork*. To engage

students use symbolism from contemporary society and the language of gangs may surface in this discussion.

- What numbers are a part of your life? How can those numbers be connected to writing? To others?

Another connection would be to read about historical parallels such as the use of conscripted individuals and/or slaves to build The Great Wall or the Pyramids.

Prior to reading the trilogy of poems entitled “*Depersonalization Step 1*,” “*Depersonalization Step 2*,” and “*Depersonalization Step 3*” participate in a three-to-five-minute free-write:

- **What does it mean to depersonalize or dehumanize another human being? Is it done today? In our society? Respond in any way that works for you as a writer.**
- **Turn and talk with an individual near you.**
- **List group ideas and discuss.**
- **If you read simply for pleasure, think about these ideas and make a personal connection.**

If this book is being used for instruction, provide some background for individuals who may need more information prior to reading or have students research and provide the background for the group. For example, as far back as ancient Egypt and Rome, societies have been using the process of dehumanization to control individuals and groups without little thought for what this means to the society as a whole.

This practice of treating others as subhuman has continued through the ages of slavery in our nation. The Holocaust was an exercise in genocide that was known world-wide and genocide continues even in today’s world. Names of places such as Darfur, Burundi, and Rwanda are known world-wide for such evils.

- **Is the process of dehumanization is about control? Why or why not? What evidence exists?**
- **How does it create an opportunity to view another as “subhuman”; therefore, rendering those individuals as a non-entity and worthless?**
- **Does removing moral responsibility make it easier to inflict pain, be it mental or physical? Explain your answer.**

- **Is dehumanization a deliberate action?**

Whether deliberate or not, dehumanization does exist in our world today. It existed in Jimmy Santiago Baca's world when he was incarcerated.

If you are an individual reading poetry for personal pleasure or enrichment, you know what to do – skip over the classroom instructions and just read or use the questions as a guide for your thinking.

If you are in a classroom or reading and/or responding with a facilitated group, read each of the poems that follow closely. As you read the passages, mark and annotate or code the text. Highlight words you do not know, find interesting, or that need more explanation to clarify the context. Paraphrase for meaning and examine the speaker, his tone and narrative voice. Write any questions you have in the margins.

- **Turn and talk in small groups to share your thoughts and ideas.**
- **Read each selection aloud to the class. A fluent model can provide clarity of understanding for some individuals. Ask students to continue to mark the text, but in a different color for each reading.**
- **Ask students to return to their small groups and discuss any new ideas, questions, etc.**
- **What are the ways that dehumanization is portrayed in these three poems?**
- **You may ask students to determine how the poems narrate Jimmy's history and/or present facts versus observations.**
- **At this point a free-flow of ideas and questions should propel the discussion and writing.**

Cross-Curricular Connections:

- View dehumanization in historical context using the above method and connecting it to JSB's poems.
- Research genocide and how it begins and develops.
- A mathematical approach may be to look at and collect statistics of genocide and/or prison states and present factual numbers within this context.

Possible Paired Readings:

Holocaust Fiction and/or non-fiction, or young adult literature related to the Holocaust

Letters From Rifka (2009) Karen Hesse

Genocide in Elie Wiesel's *Night*: Social Issues in Literature (2004) Louise Hawker

Genocide in Anne Frank's, *The Diary of a Young Girl*: Social Issues in Literature (2001) Louise Hawker

Read the next three poems and reflect upon JSB's words and connect your thoughts. Annotating the text will be helpful, even to the reader who reads for pleasure.

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Depersonalization: Step 1

The new recruits are jammed in seats
with barred windows and chains
undulating everywhere. The bus parks
outside the walls in blazing sunlight.
A sooty smoke stack and clean steeple
poke up from the walls: "That's
the death house and that's the church,"
offers an old timer back again, he says,
because he gets lonely out in society
and wants to see his friends again.
The young eyes fixed on the steeple
and then the smoke stack; some feign
bravery and laugh about it all,
monomaniacs cackling about their adventures
with the law and ladies. A sharp silence
pierces their hearts when the big gates open.
There is a quivering fear in their veins,
a helpless wailing in the quiet of their eyes,
"Let me out! I don't belong here...I am
confused, lonely, sick, jobless, homeless,
I need help, I don't belong here!"
But nobody listens or even will ask about
how you feel, you are a convict now,
not a human being, a convict, got it?
You don't feel, you don't love, you are
not to show kindness, you are a beast
of burden, and you are here to work
and wait, work and wait, work and wait.

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Depersonalization: Step 2

The nights grow lonelier, lonelier,
and you are a new-born fetus in this womb of hell,
the pain and the hurt of growth come like never
before.

You must cuss to be cool, walk like a young bull,
rip-off the commissary of younger inmates, carry a
shank,
take drugs...you must grow into these things...
confusion wrenches your heart into dark tangles,
you are caught in a suffocating web, helpless,
suspended like a chunk of meat before butchers,
your soul has caught on the heavy hook of despair,
slowly molding, blistering into raw sores,
and each day comes with another handful of salts
your hopes and dreams become heavy blocks of rock
on your shoulders, as they gradually slump
and the sweet limbs of the spirit are amputated
and trampled by so much darkness,
and you toss the dead matter of hopes and dreams
away like something illegal and evil;
your tools are racism and violence, deception
and a knife...a child of prison now.

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Depersonalization: Step 3

New recruits come into the cell block,

there are hoots and whistles. Someone
 was murdered this morning and you stop to talk
 and joke half-heartedly with others. They make way
 as the stretcher is wheeled in and the dream man
 taken away. The crumbled receipt of goods;
 a ragged bag of sunburned wrinkles, tobacco stained
 fingers and gums, the same old denims and number,
 a tan brogan dangling out of the sheet,
 brown apologetic eyes, graying hair, and crinkled
 lips,
 all tossed into the wastebasket of a prison graveyard,
 like an insignificant book of dreams
 on the shelf since anyone can remember, collecting
 dust,
 no one ever cared to read it, a society too busy,
 a prison too blind, its pages yellowed, it was a
 thousand
 years old some say, and it has become dust again.
 The barber goes back to snipping hair,
 the porters go back to slopping the tiers,
 you go to your cell, adjust the TV,
 make some hot coffee and watch “All in the Family.”

As you read the following quote, think of what it means to you and how it connects to the three preceding poems:

- *“People will rarely remember what you did, but they will always remember how you made them feel” (Author unknown).*

What does this quote mean to you? How does this relate to the readings and discussions about dehumanization? Write, turn and talk to share. Help each other to make connections.

- List ways that the process of dehumanization is used in today’s society.

Reminders if the group is unable to come up with ideas: Bullying, home situations (domestic violence/child abuse), our prisons, etc. This is a great place for making text-to-text connections of young adult and/or classical literature, text-to-self (one’s own world), and text-to-world (that world can be home, school, play, or global).

- Can we change the idea and implementation of dehumanization? Do we wish to change it?

- Write a poem: *Dehumanization is...* or respond to the discussions of the past days.
- Engage in other extension activities and/or cross curricular connections.
- Place an individual or personified individual (the prisons, the schools, and the workplace) on trial for participation in the dehumanization process.
- Have you ever been the victim or aggressor in such an action? If so, how did it make you feel?
- As an extension activity ask students to write a letter of apology to one's victim if he or she was the aggressor, or a letter to the aggressor if he or she was victimized.
- Discuss and/or research local prisons and/or juvenile facilities. Pose the question: Can/Should a prison run without implementing this dehumanization process? Why or why not? Great topic for research and oral debate.
- Is there a process that would provide the “control” that could replace this process?
- Create a public service announcement (PSA) in video form or as a podcast – the message is up to you.
- Perform a dramatic interpretation (music/dance/acting) of any of the three poems written by JSB or an interpretation of your understanding.
- Create a work of art that represents one or all of the poems.

Possible Paired Readings:

Night (1960) Elie Wiesel

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (2000) James Allen

Readings on Apartheid

Readings on the Lucifer Effect (dehumanization) by Philip Zimbardo (Stanford University)

Again, if you read these poems simply for the pleasure of reading, don't get caught up in the curricular suggestions. These are merely “talking points” for extended discussions. You may wish to consider a book club to look closely at

some of the topics that are brought to the surface and consider action, or use it solely for discussion.

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Waking Up In Prison

**With a violent tear, the vengeful disembodied voice,
screeches over the loud speaker:
sudden, like a stake driven into my brow,
the bones of my skull splintered,
as it rips through the silky mist of my dreams,
crushing the images of ones I long for,
of places I've come from and been to.**

**Crushing my grandfather's rocking chair,
the black old pot-bellied stove,
darkening the sad red flames dancing on mud walls,
disfiguring the ancient bronze face,
the lips withered like rose leaves,
the silver hair bunned up,
torn apart, the image buckles under,
like a struggling doe shot in the heart,
its knees crumple, and its great brown eyes
look at you, dismayed, astonished, hurt.**

**As the voice comes to crushing, hurtles down,
an upheaval of boulders breaking and jolting down,
with scissor-like edges, down upon my heart,
violently suffocating it...**

**The racks of cell doors crack open agonized
like old coffins whose nails scratch,
unwilling to open, petrified graves,
unwilling to release the living, breathing dead.**

**Four cells away a friend of mine walks out,
sleepy eyed, he greets me, “Want a cigarette?”
as if he knew what I had been through, “Ya” I say.
With our hands punched into our coat pockets,
we walk down the tier, down the stairwell,
across the main floor of the cellblock,
and outside to the landing,
where there is a real sky and still a few stars,
where we inhale fresh air, cold and clean,
and our breath gleams out in balloons against
the compound’s brilliant spotlights.**

**We walk across the twilight compound to the kitchen,
Beneath my tongue I taste the emptiness of another
day,
like a capsule of poison, and with my first cup of
coffee,
it slowly pops, dissolves under my tongue,
slowly numbing my heart,
still moist from last night’s dream of back home.**

Engagement in any writing workshop requires attention to words. The words of Jimmy Santiago Baca create images that one cannot ignore and evoke emotion that one must release.

- **In the preceding poem, “Waking Up in Prison,” identify the images of life and death, both real and metaphorical.**
- **Does the way that one perceives death have consequence as to how life is lived?**
- **Identify the imagery and the extremes within this poem that speak loudly to you, the reader. What does it say to you? For example, the reality of waking up in prison is in opposition to the longing for life beyond bars and waking from the dream is like waking to die each day. The imagery of death in the “struggling doe” in the text awakens the reader to the harshness and immediate reality of this life.**
- **Appoint group facilitators and engage in discussion about the poem and ask students to conclude where and how the metaphor is carried and to highlight and annotate the text. Have students investigate different metaphors for death and write some poems.**

- If an individual chooses, writing about the opposite, birth in metaphorical terms, could also provide a perspective to the discussions and allow for comparing and contrasting.
- This mentor text, “Waking Up in Prison,” shows how a metaphor is carried throughout a piece of writing. What other intangible items can be made tangible by metaphor? Using a metaphor, create a poem that speaks about an aspect of one’s own life.

Possible Paired Readings:

Investigate metaphors of death in works such as *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein* or the *Odyssey*.

In the splintered sections of letters, Inman writes to Baca,
“I really loved your letter – you sound like a strong-spirited guy. ‘I write poetry as a rock-breaker breaks rocks.’ Man! There’s a poem in itself...’ It is very clear to me that you have a style of your own, a range of vision and approaches, and a strong use of the language.”

Letter excerpt from WI to JSB

Much like the fragmented pieces of JSB’s life, letter fragments between Baca and Tucson poet, Will Inman exist and are shared throughout this text. Inman symbolically threw a life-line to JSB during his prison years and helped him to find his voice through questioning, acknowledgments, facilitation and friendship all through the power of the written word in letters. As educators, or facilitators of writing workshops, the opportunity exists to use Jimmy’s words and one’s knowledge of the community within which one works.

“Life is a splendorous kaleidoscope, but in our rapid fall, we see only the blur; the rope burns on our souls as we try to grip and lose our courage, pain of the body slams our hearts aside, upends our well-ordered morals like a table of golden trophies, and we sit in the destruction; despair drives some to attach others; damage submits others to fold-up, and within the folds lets Willpower mold green, a slip spot, moist for eggs of Tyranny.” *Letter excerpt from JSB to WI*

- What is contained in your “kaleidoscope of life”?
- What controls your actions?
- Does it affect the actions of others?

- **Begin to look within at one's own "range of vision and use of strong language" that defines you as an individual.**

5

My Inability to "Adhere"

**Those in the way of history
Will be labeled as "unable to adhere"
Discarded like the Indians
who could not "adhere".
I am looked upon for twenty-four hours a day,
no sunshine, no entertainment,
ill health due to cramped conditions,
and immense frustration.
It's not illuminating
as one riding into a conquered town
on a white stallion;
more like Paul Revere galloping
to tell everyone the tyrants are coming
and finding empty eyes and vacant sleepy heads,
quite submissive and willing to be drawn
under kind-hearted yokes.
So here I am, pondering the clash of violence,
oppression, the killing of souls,
the stale smell in the air
that jolts the heart like big rifles,
as the bullets of violence and frustration,
kill the souls; kill creativity, God's creation,
those white doves, root up red roses,
leaving empty eyes, rootless lives of men.**

Re-read the fragment of a letter from above and "My Inability to Adhere." Some ideas to consider while reading: Are roots, physical or mental,

what secure us and make us strong? Write about your roots – are they strong, weak, or entangled?

- **Do we all have roots? Think about how far your roots go?**
- **What can break the roots? How does this affect your life?**
- **What is your personal inability to adhere? Write about it.**
- **How do the two readings go together? Do they? Write to explain, analyze, or simply provide reflection.**
- **Using the fragment as a model text, provide a stem for writers, “Life is...” and invite them to use vivid language.**

Cross-Curricular Connections:

- Use artistic expression (any medium) to represent your roots.
- What other groups in society have been considered “unable to adhere”?

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Letters Come to Prison

**White doves
crashing through the layers
of ice in the air,
and land warmly
in freezing palms of cons.**

- **What symbolism can be found and how does that connect the reader to the words?**
- **What importance are letters to those who are incarcerated?**
- **Can letters be a detriment?**
- **Have letters ever played an important role in your personal life?**
- **Many individuals today correspond only using technology. What if that technology to connect you to friends, family, and the world were unavailable. How would you and/or your life change?**
- **How will history record great correspondence between individuals in the years to come?**
- **Is it possible we can lose our history, our culture and more because of today’s innovation and new technologies? Will it matter?**
- **Think of a time when you made a “wrong” choice in life. Write a letter to yourself dated a few days before the incident.**

Extension Activities and Cross-Curricular Connections:

Letter writing is becoming a lost art form in our society. Just as storytelling waned after writing became the trend, letter writing in today's world of instant gratification is waning as well.

- Discuss the uses for writing letters throughout history and famous correspondents over the ages and how this affects cultures. It may include dignitaries, lovers, academia, business, etc.
- Create letters (including all the artistic nuances) from past eras.
- Create a letter to your best friend about your "inability (or ability) to adhere."

Possible Paired Readings:

Letters of Abelard and Heloise, The Love Letter of Abelard and Heloise (1901)
Gollarez & Horten - Translation

Letters of John and Abigail Adams (@1782)

Letters/Writings of Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Paine

6**A Life of Chance**

**Each day appears a coin-stacked table,
white chips of my life,
lined up like old buffalo's teeth,
in wavering heat of their hunger
were drawn to silvery desert pools, unaware.**

**Soft fingertips of Hope
on cool rims of my skull
slide along,
tips for openers gamble my life
on a bluff hand,**

**For tomorrow rides in from the horizon,
a bloodless gunslinger
with cards up his sleeve,
sitting across from us
we never know
when he raises his head,**

if it's to draw his gun
or buy us a beer.

1

It's Not What I Want But What Must Be

Our happiness is a thing of the past,
we did what we thought was best,
in this world with violence,
religious fanatics and love so false.
With time, the keepsakes we keep melt,
the impressions of sadness on our feelings melt,
the memoirs go away, they also melt,
even though I don't understand or wish to believe it,
that we who made all of it, could destroy all of it,
perhaps, our riches of love were too much for the
heart,
a heart that shows its face to the world, is destroyed,
this much we know, and somehow go on living.

After reading “A Life of Chance” and “It's Not What I Want But What Must Be,” consider the following:

- **Think about the difference between choice and chance? Are they the same?**
- **What if we never took a chance?**
- **Write to present your views: Chance, choice, fate...Do we let things happen to us, encourage them, or deter them?**
- **Other areas to examine in terms of the surrounding world and how one fits in it, is examining how do we survive the un-survivable in history, in current events, and in our own lives? What are those events and how are you personally affected?**
- **Think about the idea of keepsakes, those things we hold important. What does it mean “...*the keepsakes we keep melt*”? Is this something we, society – individuals, do to ourselves or is it put upon us?**

In the poem that follows, “Little Difference,” consider the question, “How does one move from childhood to *here*?” Depending on where “here” currently is, a different answer will exist.

- **Ask readers to think about their own childhood and consider where they are now as the poem is read aloud. Individual readers can also read the poem aloud to experience that sensory effect. Individuals can brainstorm about who am I, where do I come from, and more. Turn this into a full piece of writing.**
- **Dissect how to change “fate” through a course of action or lack of action. Looking at one’s own life, what would make a difference or what could have made a difference?**
- **Is society doomed to repeat its mistakes, collectively and/or individually?**

Cross-Curricular Connections:

- This is also a terrific connection to historical and current events and social justice where research and writing in all forms can provide not only great conversation about the world around us, but also to comprehend how one fits within it.
- The idea of social justice permeates many of today’s young adult literature, contemporary fiction, and non-fiction. This idea is also found in graphic novels, varied medias, artwork, lyrics, poetry and the news. Seek out connections that speak to you.

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Little Difference

**I listen to the same songs on the radio,
Here in this little cubicle of 5x9,
Playing Rummy with my celly,
Who asks who is that singing?
Bet it’s Lou Rawls. I said, Nope.
He won the bet and lightly punched
Me in the arm.
Except for the few gray hairs on my head,
These days piled up like worn out shoes,
Not much has changed in the last ten years,
I’m still listening to the same old songs,
In prison again, playing Rummy with my celly.**

Read the poem “Life” aloud and think about, but do not share aloud the following:

- **What is your reaction? Do you react?**
- **What is the speaker telling us?**

Individuals may choose to free-write answers or simply “hold” the answers inside.

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Life

**Here on my bed,
I watch a spider crawl down the wall,
Mmm (he pauses),
then carefully toes forward,
with a pinched foothold,
kinky legs cringe,
through pesticide fume-mines.**

**I close my eyes for a moment,
then open them to see him
belly dive on my bed,
and begin to spin a silk tent
in the brown army wool.**

**Friends,
we respect each other,
until tonight,
brave hunter
with weapons of silk
and patience.
Today – my comrade,
Tonight my enemy.**

- **Now re-read the poems silently and mark the text and determine what else one can discern from a deeper reading. Turn and talk in small groups to share ideas for readings 40 and 43.**

- **Identify themes or ideas that require some discussion. If the reader is not making connections, here are a few ideas that may get the conversation moving:**
- **Look at the phrase ...”*through pesticide fume-mines.*” Determine what this might refer to in a setting of incarceration. How does the speaker’s world compare to that of the spider? To that of your world?**
The idea of a poison life abounds throughout many of the poems. Are there connections students can make to other poems?
- **Another theme herein is the concept of friendship. In the world where the spider and JSB exist, there are pseudo friendships. Do pseudo friendships exist in our own lives? If so, why do they exist? How does this differ from “real” friendship?**
- **Think about a place and time where one must always be on guard, spinning a web of one’s own to stay safe, attack, or deal with the circumstance of life is at that moment. Write about a time when being on guard or “spinning a web” was necessary.**

This is also a great opportunity to discuss metaphors such as spinning a web and how such a technique can add to one’s ability to “say it” without “directly” stating a thought, willing the reader to think and connect.

Possible Paired Readings:

Looking at foils in literature (individuals who contrast one another and/or whose differences illuminate important characteristics in the other) one may wish to read about the following:

Mercutio and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*

Bertha and Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*

Jekyll and Hyde in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*