

Unity of Personality Shown in the Class Themes Written by a Schoolboy

ANTONIO BRUCK, MEXICO CITY

Presented in this article are a series of quotations taken from the class themes written by a Latin-American boy, Luis, in the sixth and seventh grades of school, during his twelfth and thirteenth years. I never saw the boy, so I can give no statement as to his "type," but I see no reason to suppose any organic element behind his discouragement, nor any general "psychopathic personality."

The main point in the reading of the boy's themes is to show the unity of the personality, which is so clearly manifest in every one of the quotations, to show the influence of a discouraging father upon his sons and to illustrate how *themes* tell the consulting psychologist not only the symptoms of the maladjustment (as character tests do) but also the formative education that has erected the concept and style of life behind the symptoms.

THEME I: WHAT I WANT TO BE WHEN GROWN UP

1) "Father desires..."

The very first words make the psychologist suspicious; it seems to him that Luis must be a "puppet child." It isn't normal that a boy, when writing on his future profession, should start off telling us about his father's desire regarding it, and not about his own.

2) "...that I become an architect, because there is money in it."

We see that the father is no idealist. He does not tell his son about the possibilities an architect has, to create work for those who are out of work or to strive for better housing in the community; he tells him of the "money" that can be made in the profession. This is a dangerous education, because if "money" becomes the objective of the child, we cannot count upon his becoming a highly ethical professional man.

3) "I shall be honest, courageous and happy."

This "declaration of intention" is very nice, but it is of no particular psychological value to us, because we have seen that the boy has been educated to strive for "money" and that he is rather a "puppet". Such declarations may well be the result of wishful thinking, and the very fact that such thinking is reported by the boy makes us feel that he must be consoling himself with such thoughts, perhaps directed against frequent self doubts.

4) "From primary school I shall first go to high school, and there, 'si Dios quiere', they will give me the High School Certificate. Then I shall go to the school of architecture, where I shall study the profession."

In the country of Luis, this "si Dios quiere" is very frequently used by older people, even after such simple statements as "I shall come to

see you tomorrow", the literal translation being: "if God wishes it to be so". While most people might carelessly assume that Luis has just taken on the habit of older people, we must insist that *no habit is taken on unless it is in accordance with the individual's concept of life*. No boy of 12, who believes that success depends on his own ability and efforts, would ever use this expression. The fact that Luis did use this "si Dios quiere" suggests to us that he has not been taught to rely upon himself and to believe in the efficacy of whatever he himself might do.

We cannot consider it a casual expression where Luis says: "they will give me the High School Certificate." The normal thing to say would have been: "There I shall work for the High School Certificate" or, at least, "There I shall obtain my High School Certificate". The expression "they will give me" suggests the presence of a concept of life which automatically influences the boy's way of expressing himself and the chief element of which is: Those "above" must *give*, like parents give to their children.

5) "When an architect, I shall work with my father, so that he may help me in what I cannot do alone."

If a boy wishes to follow the footsteps of his father and study the father's profession, it may be considered normal for him to say that he will first work under his father's guidance. A self-confident boy would not have said, however, "so that HE may help ME in what I cannot do alone." He would have said something like: "So that I may help HIM in his work while studying the practical side of the profession."

6) "In accordance with my hopes, I think of getting married, in order to have children and to make architects of them, too."

The expression "in accordance with my hopes" has no organic place in the preceding sentence; it is nothing but another automatic manifestation of the lack of self-confidence, closely related to the "habit" commented on under 4). Luis, furthermore, does not say "I shall get married", but "I think of getting married", he *hopes he thinks*. This, too, may be looked upon as a result of inner insecurity.

THEME II: CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTIONS

7) "When I was 7 years old, and first came to this School with my father, I did not want him to leave me and I started to cry. Every morning he would bring me to the School."

Generally, it is the mother who accompanies a child to the school on the first school day. It may be that Luis was "brought" to the school on that day by the father because the mother could not go (we must not "over-psychologize", she or another child of hers may have been ill), but it is also possible that the father wanted to "bring" his first-born to the school.

At any rate, this quotation shows us how insufficiently independent the child was when entering school—how unable to enter a community

of children with pleasure over the possibility to make friends. We become aware of invisible strings by which this puppet child is tied to the home.

Since the father probably went to his office at the time the boy had to leave for school, it is natural for him to have accompanied the boy to the school door every morning. However, the boy does not express himself about this common departure from the home in a positive way. He does not say: "We left home together every morning, each going to his work", but: "Every morning HE would BRING ME to the School."

8) "In the course of time I became friends with my schoolmates; I got more confident and I started to go home alone from School, and I became more of a man."

There must have been much talk in the home in those days about the boy's lack of "manliness." A certain improvement in this field during the school years is natural, but we find no reason here to suppose that there has been a considerable change in the self-confidence of Luis. He does not state any facts that would show us active participation in the life of his school-mates.

It is interesting to note, in quotations 7 and 8, that Luis has thrice spelled "school" with a capital "S". It is as if the difference in size which existed between him and the large school building with its 1200 pupils when he entered school—or the impression the building made on him then—had automatically influenced his spelling.

THEME III: A DREAM I HAVE HAD

In the dream related by the boy, he appears to have a certain physical self-confidence in connection with bicycle-riding. Nevertheless, even here we see him react with tears when, in the dream, his father threatens to take the bicycle away, because he is never at home.

9) "Father told me that he would take it away and I started to cry."

When the poor "I" has to face "HIM", it always feels helpless and insignificant—even when it is dreaming.

THEME IV: MY FAMILY

In this theme we see that the boy is a first-born son and that he has two brothers, two and three years younger than himself, respectively.

We may suppose that these two brothers have also contributed to the lack of self-confidence of Luis, ever since their birth. They must have taken away from him much of the attention of his mother, right after he had reached the age of 2.

We may also recall that fathers generally have a tendency to consider their first-born sons as "heirs to the throne" and that the special attention they give them due to this fact, full of declarations of what they expect of them, of how they will have to be more than their fathers, generally results in a lack of self-confidence in the children. For the latter, their fathers are "great" and they cannot well imagine that they could become

even greater than their progenitors. (This may not be true in the American environment, but it is so in Europe, in Egypt, and in Latin America, where I have seen many cases based on this parental attitude.)

OTHER MANIFESTATIONS OF LUIS (at the age of 12)

In themes written by the boy during the same school year, we find several details which confirm the impression we have already received of him. Thus, for example, he writes:

10) "In the school of architecture the professors make you take examinations, and if you pass you become an architect."

11) "If I can pass in all the high school years, I shall pass from high school to the school of architecture, where they prepare you in order to make an architect out of you."

12) "Would to God that I become as good an architect as my father is."

The first two quotations show us once again the characteristic way of persons lacking self-confidence. Without even noticing the awkwardness of their sentences, they say such things as:

"the professors make you take examinations"

"they prepare you in order to make an architect out of you."

We can see clearly how Luis feels himself to be a puppet and not an acting person. He also contemplates the possibility of failure ("if I can pass") and leaves it to God to make as good an architect of him as his father is.

In his eagerness to find details which would reduce his fright as to the task that he will face once the professors "have made an architect out of him," the boy has even found the following argument:

13) "I am sure I will not have to buy many books, since father is an architect, and he has practically all the books on architecture."

In a drawing on the profession he intends to study, Luis drew a building with a sign saying "Office." In the drawings of all the other boys of the school, where there are signs above or next to the doors, all the signs carry the names of the future tradesmen or professional men. Experience with such drawings entitles us to say that if Luis has not put his name on the sign, this was due to the fact that the name did not enter his pencil automatically as it did with the other boys' pencils, because their owners looked more self-confidently into the future.

LUIS IN HIGH SCHOOL (at the age of 13)

(In Luis' country there are six years of primary school and five years of high school; in accordance with the American system, he would be in the seventh grade.)

After having spent three months and a half in the new institution, where he now had 13 male teachers instead of a woman teacher as in primary school, Luis was asked to answer a series of questions similar

to those he had answered by separate themes in his former school.

The following are his most characteristic answers together with the corresponding questions:

A. *What will you do upon leaving high school?*

14) "Upon leaving high school, I shall stay in town in order to pass Xmas and the New Year Festivals in the city. Then I shall go to the country with my family to spend the rest of the vacation period."

Among the 596 boys who answered this question, there was only one other boy besides Luis who did not understand that this question was aiming at what they would do in the way of further studies after having obtained their high school certificate. We are, therefore entitled to take this misunderstanding as a sign of an unusually strong longing to get away from the difficulties which studies always present to discouraged students, and to live for compensatory pleasures as long as possible. The other boy, too, clearly belonged to this type of student.

(School in the country of Luis begins in March and ends in November; most people leave town for their farms only after the New Year.)

B. *Will you finish your high school?*

15) "Si Dios quiere", I shall finish my high school.

We have commented on this "if God wishes it to be so", in connection with the quotation under number 4.

C. *Do you believe you will have to repeat any high school year?*

16) "I believe I shall not have to repeat any school year, except if I should become ill* and if my parents are alive so that they may support me, for otherwise I would have to leave school and go to work."

The answer is logical and in accordance with the question only up to the point I have marked with an *. Here the boy, in accordance with his inner insecurity, makes a mental jump and begins to think and write about what might happen if he lost his parents, so that they could no longer "support" him. It is evident that the word "ill" represents an opportunity for such a mental jump, but self-confident boys did not make it. For Luis, this mental jump is very much in accordance with his lack of self-confidence.

D. *What are your intentions for the period following your high school years?*

17) "I intend to have my father send me to study architecture abroad."

A strange intention! He intends that his father should do something with him! It sounds as if he would want his father to wrap him up and send him abroad by Parcel Post.

E. *Why did you pick out the profession you want to study?*

18) "Because Father 'me ha ilusionado' telling me stories about it."

"Telling me stories" is a rather childish way of expressing oneself at the age of 13, instead of something like, let us say: 'telling about the buildings he has constructed'.

"Me ha ilusionado" is the right expression for Luis. He is not "interesado", interested, but "ilusionado". Correctly translated, this means that his father has fascinated him with his "stories", but we feel that architecture will not be more than an illusion for Luis.

F. *What are the difficulties you might encounter and what will you do then?*

19) "I might encounter some difficulties, as, for instance, that father might be unable to send me abroad to study there, and in order to overcome this difficulty I might have to work in some other line, in order to make money and to go abroad. Would to God that this should not happen".

Many boys have foreseen in their themes this difficulty of having to work first in order to make money for their studies abroad, but Luis is the only one who has added: "Would to God...."

G. *Tell us a Childhood Recollection.*

20) "When I was about five years old, I was eager to enter school and I kept on begging my father that HE should PUT ME into school. I kept on telling him that he should buy me a satchel and copybooks. He always told me that HE would PUT ME into school when I would be seven and buy me the school equipment at that time. Finally I did get to be seven and he DID PUT ME into school and bought me the satchel and the equipment."

We see that before he had to face the reality of the School with the capital S, (see our commentary after quotation 8), Luis was very eager to go to school. However, even in connection with this intense desire to be a big boy, he now speaks of himself as of a puppet. Three times in six lines we find him referring to himself as a chess-board pawn of his father. (Capitals mine: HE SHOULD PUT ME, HE WOULD PUT ME, HE DID PUT ME).

FIVE YEARS LATER

Is it possible for a boy with so great a sense of insecurity to finish high school and then go on studying architecture? Will he even get through high school?

Luis, at least, did not even finish the first year of high school (actually the seventh school year for him, not the ninth, as it would have been in the States). Three months after having given the above answers to questions A—G, he left the high school because the total of his marks in several subjects during the first three bi-monthly periods showed he would have to repeat the first year.

I knew nothing of the presence of Luis in the high school at that time, since I had to read the themes of 596 pupils and got around to read his when he had already left the high school. The study preceding this postscriptum was dictated in Spanish at that time.

Last year, when I made a special study of the boys who were in the

sixth grade with Luis in the primary school, I decided to call upon his father, in order to find out what became of the boy. I had heard through friends that this gentleman was very prosperous and the owner of much valuable land near the capital.

The man I met was rather unpleasant. He told me that Luis did not want to go on studying when he had failed in the first year of high school and that, therefore, he got the boy a job in an export firm.

The salary of Luis in the first year was the magnificent equivalent of \$10 a month, but, by the time the conversation with the father took place, he had \$20 a month, due to the custom of his firm of raising all salaries of its employees automatically by \$5 per month each year. This was the fourth year of Luis with the same firm, and the fact that they have not given him a better position in all these years, but raised his salary on account of his years of service only, shows that he is still the same "puppet" he was in his school years.

I tried to make the father understand that there was no reason to suppose Luis to be incapable of going on with his studies, saying that the boy's themes showed him to be an intelligent but discouraged person. His answer was: "I have thought of PUTTING HIM into night high school this year". Once more poor Luis was to be PUT into a new place by his wire-puller.

I tried to explain that it was no use to "put" Luis anywhere if he did not develop enough self-confidence to profit by the new opportunity given him, and even offered to have a few psychological talks with the boy, should he come to see me, free of charge.

Luis has never come to see me. I have, however, heard through former classmates of his that the boy led a dissipated life and got drunk frequently, in the company of other young men who also failed in their studies.

As so many discouraged persons, Luis, too, seems to seek in alcohol and in purchasable pleasures oblivion of his intellectual and social insignificance. For once, it is he who "puts" himself into new situations, but, due to his discouragement, they are, of course, negative situations.