

Sketch

Volume 30, Number 2

1964

Article 9

Motivation

Robert Schenck*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1964 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Motivation

by Robert Schenck

STEPHEN looked slowly around the dimly lighted room as he sat waiting for the hour to drag itself to an end. His thumb and little finger pulled his ring down over his knuckle and then pushed it back again. He searched the room carefully for something of interest which would relieve the boredom that was settling upon his body, making his back and legs ache with discomfort in every position.

Inspecting the rear wall, he noticed that the jostling haste with which classes had rushed from the room had left a ragged gray band of scuff marks next to the floor. From there, his eyes followed a lath up the center aisle and read the title of each book that cluttered it. From a book called "Patterns of French", his gaze moved upward and focused upon the legs of a girl whose skirt revealed an inch too much thigh. He contemplated her subtle promiscuity. He could never see something like that without wondering how many times she'd done it. Hundreds, he thought, and moved his eyes on up the aisle. With his back to the class Dr. Pedden rhythmically removed from the blackboard some statistics which compared the number of public schools in 1880 with the number in 1959. The seat of his pants and the tail of his dark blue coat were not as slick and shiny as the rest because of his habit of leaning against the chalk tray when he lectured. They were always like that.

When he turned to the class to begin speaking again, he touched a hand to his wet black hair. It amused Stephen that Pedden seemed to purposely leave a strand or two dangling over his forehead. But it was not his hair that a stranger would first notice. It was his nose. It grew from a narrow bridge between his eyes into a great bulbous thing that hung heavily, a little off center, over his small pallid lips. And when he spoke, he pinched his words from his mouth with such restraint that it seemed he felt any excessive move-

ment would send his nose toppling from his face to the floor. As Stephen studied its similarity to a gourd, Pedden rested on the chalk tray and began to speak.

His voice rose and fell over the hushed room with a gravity which the simplicity of the question did not warrant. "Now that you've seen the startling increase in the number of schools, this should imply to you that, uh, well, that the number of pupils has risen just as fast, or even faster. This pheno . . . phenomena took place because around the turn of the century, people became aware that a high school education was becoming more important in the future; in fact, it would soon become a necessity. This pheno . . . phenomena is very similar to one taking place today. Uh, does anyone have an idea what this would be?"

Immediately, thirty faces, silent and expressionless in their contempt, bent slowly, almost imperceptibly, toward polished desktops and held . . . immobile . . . as though any minute gesture would betray their anonymity. Stephen, looking solemnly at his desk, wiggled his pencil on the white, blue-lined paper into four letters and then, pressing harder, began scrawling a jumbled mass of spirals below them. At some sort of signal, he spoke again—this time muted and unsure, but not really aware of his imposition.

"Well, uh, anyone?"

The girl in the short skirt raised her hand lethargically and began to speak with feigned enthusiasm. "Well, this is probably a lot like the college situation today. I mean about everyone realizing its importance in the future and everything."

Obviously encouraged by this response, Pedden continued with new vigor. And Stephen, taken by surprise, looked up to see what effect this outburst would have on that precariously balanced nose. He caught only a glance before the head in front of him obstructed his view. He moved to the right . . . and it moved with him. After pausing a moment to see if it would move back again, he shifted to the left only to find that, two rows ahead, someone else was now leaning comfortably in that direction. Frustrated, he rested his chin on his fist and began adding to the mass of doodles on the paper before him.

Pedden droned on. “. . . and as we can see, with four million births here every year, there are going to be many, many new opportunities for teachers. And you people are probably already aware of the many fringe benefits in teaching such as group health insurance and group life insurance and disability insurance and retirement plans and . . . ”

As Stephen’s eyes began to roll under his eyelids, shapes began to lose their edges as they wavered before him. Pedden’s words lost meaning as they ran on and on, becoming smoother and smoother and smoother, until the syllables fused into one humming monotone. Letting his eyes shut themselves completely, he began imagining the girl’s dress creeping further and further up her legs, their tan growing lighter and lighter. He rubbed his eyes, and very . . . slowly . . . opened them again.

The Old Woman Speaks to the Old Man

by Dave Thomas

Come here old man. Don’t I remember you?
Of course, why many’s the time I’ve seen you pass
This very way; You haven’t changed much
Have you? The same white beard, the limp, the cane,
The old brown hat. They used to say (when we
Were young) they used to say you lived in a cold
Stone house in the woods, and carried folks away
At night. We’d run to Father then in fright,
And I think that even he was half afraid
To see you come. But now I see—you have
A kindly face, a face that we old folks
Can understand. Come close old man, come close.