

How to Act Like a Highbrow

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DO YOU sometimes feel like an illiterate clod who does not appreciate the finer things in life? With today's emphasis on education and science, it is obvious that the intellectuals and the highbrows are here to stay. This problem cannot be avoided by fleeing to the backwoods—flee far enough into just about any backwoods, these days, and you come to a rocket proving ground. And there you are again, surrounded by intellectuals.

Where does this leave all us non-intellectual types who don't know a radio isotope from a pingpong ball?

Someone once said (could it have been Cleopatra? It *sounds* like her) "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em." We are faced with a lesser-of-two-evils type of choice: we must all become either intellectual or highbrow. Becoming an intellectual involves years of poring over books with improbable titles like *Summa Theologica* and *Quantum Mechanics*. It is completely possible that you may emerge from this with your mind tottering, absolutely tottering, from trying to read Chaucer in Middle English.

This is a risk you need not take. With boldness and two or three hours' practice you can learn how to act like a highbrow. A highbrow is, after all, a pseudo-intellectual; he is non-creative, and what he does best is *appreciate*. You, too, can appreciate perfectly well, once you get the hang of it. Then follow a few simple rules, and before you can say "intercontinental ballistic missiles" you will be a full-fledged imitation highbrow, ready to dazzle the world.

The first rule concerns the matter of clothing. In the past it was easy to look like a highbrow if you wore a battered trenchcoat and a bitter smile and carried a copy of *The Atlantic Monthly* under your arm. Nowadays, however, trenchcoats have been popularized by TV detectives, and almost half a million people subscribe to *The Atlantic*—so you can see that this costume is no longer enough to indicate that you belong to a select group.

Today's highbrow wears clothes very much like those of any other man, except that they are slightly crumpled. He is not fashion conscious—he wouldn't recognize Ivy League if it ambled up and flipped its back buckle at him. Remember, the *haute couture* is not for you. Don't buy anything conspicuously stylish. Better yet, don't buy anything at all for about four years.

Now we must take up the problem of what you are going to be appreciative *about*. The real highbrow specializes in appreciating one particular thing. You must be very, very careful here. The thing you select should be somewhat obscure, a little esoteric, and without demonstrable appeal to the masses. Fourteenth-century lute songs are a good choice, and the recordings are not prohibitively expensive. Or you might choose the works of an obscure poet. It is essential that he

be obscure; the "big" men in poetry have been appreciated over and over. It is also possible to resurrect something from the past and begin regarding it as precious. For instance, right now there is a new cult of appreciation for *Huckleberry Finn* among the real intellectuals and highbrows. They go around asking the uncultured "How long has it been since you read *Huckleberry Finn*?" with the same hauteur they would employ in inquiring "How long has it been since you finally got the alphabet firmly committed to memory?"

Remember, you are going to be a synthetic highbrow, and if you can't find anything you feel like appreciating, then make something up. I have been appreciating Ozonides for some time. When questioned about him, I reply in a superior tone, "He was a very *minor* philosopher of the Periclean Age." This is stated in a manner implying that no one else has had the wit to appreciate this neglected sage. Actually he sprang into being in his full philosopher's stature one day when I desperately needed an authority to back up a rash statement. I was at a loss for an answer to the indignant challenge, "I don't believe *anyone* ever said that!" I happened to glance at the bookshelves, and there he was, right on the back of Volume 16 of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: Mushr to Ozon. He remains my favorite philosopher. He said so many *interesting* things.

Now we must take up the vitally important matter of what you will say. It is wise to work up a stock of remarks suitable to various occasions, so that you will never be caught with your culture down. You will be able to make up your own, but here are a few to get you started.

Suppose that you have been to a concert and are asked afterward how you liked the music. Simply breathing, "It was *wonderful*," is NOT highbrow. Have ready some concert-going comment such as "Don't you think the woodwinds were just a little insistent?" By the time your questioner figures out what he thinks you meant, you will be safely home in bed.

Here is a handy reason to advance for your lack of scientific knowledge. Sigh in a mock-depreciatory way and exclaim, "I'm like Hobbes. Upon first looking into Euclid, he said, 'By God, this is impossible!'" This remark is calculated to impress both those who know who Hobbes was, as well as those who don't.

It is perfectly safe to confine yourself to quotations from *Alice in Wonderland*. Gentlemen and scholars often remark ruefully to each other, "It was the very *best* butter." Curiouser and curiouser! Borrow a copy from some trusting third-grader, and stock up.

If you get caught in a situation in which your prepared remarks are not enough, throw up a smoke screen of words like "esoteric" and "cognoscenti." As a last resort, throw in the phrase "phallic symbol." If this doesn't bring the conversation to a grinding stop, you are in over your head anyway.

The knowing smile may be used with great success. Say nothing, positively nothing, but twist your lips into a smile that implies "I

know all about it, OF COURSE I KNOW, but I'm just not saying anything to these clods."

With a slightly crumpled suit and a bow tie canted 3° ESE, with your mind full of cannily prepared phrases and your spirit laced with bravado, you are ready to join the rest of the highbrows. Don't look now, but most of them are phonies, too.

FIRST SNOWFALL

The flakes in gentle scurries sifted
 Down to earth—their coming lifted
 The bareness and bleakness of Fall's brown reign.
 Dainty they fell, haughty and vain,
 Delicate, dancing bits of disdain. . . .

Cold and sparkling, see them light,
 Lightly forming white on white,
 Dullness, darkness disappear,
 The ground is covered silver clear,
 The sky has shed a silver tear. . . .

The earth's tired countenance, scarred and worn,
 Now is graced by the favor of morn.
 Magic, a mystical mantle fell
 With condescension to grace earth well,
 A blanket of beauty, a magic spell. . . .

—SUE WINGER