

## THE ELEGANT DOUBLE NEGATIVE

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I was always taught that the double negative not only was grammatically incorrect but that it didn't have any class. Only ignorant clods said, "It don't got no class!"

It was carefully explained to me that two negatives reversed each other in arithmetic and so therefore they logically did so in grammar. So, if your mother asked if you wanted some castor oil 'you'd' better not say, "I don't want none," or you'd end up getting it. (Probably "getting it" in more than one way if you used language like that!)

O.K. But there are certain writers, notably the English, who seem to think that the double negative has loads of class, is truly snooty and might even be called the elegant double negative. True, when they use it they mean it to be an affirmative. It is as though coming right out and saying it directly would be too shocking-- a kind of linguistic frontal nudity.

"I was not unwilling to make some money..." says B.F. Skinner in an article for Psychology Today. Then there was the news item about how the English are considering "de-illegalising" certain acts. And, in an introduction to a story anthology, Rust Hill writes about a "not uncommon metaphor...that life is a journey."

Apparently Mr. Skinner feels it more delicate to beat around the bush than to say that he was willing to make some bread. I think it an uncommon nuisance to go through mental flip-flops in order to understand him and Mr. Hill.

Actually, I am not unable to say that I am without irritation at this needlessly convoluted style which occurs to no inconsiderable degree in "literary" writing. Unfortunately, it is not a totally unattractive style; not without a sort of snobby style to which I am not totally insensible and even, on occasion, do not find totally unappealing. I am also not unaware that it would probably not take no incalculable degree of effort to uproot it, but perhaps not incomparably more than to understand it.

As you see, I oppose the form on the grounds that it tangles the skein of thought until it looks like a kitten has been playing with it. In answer to the anticipated response that these writers are consenting adults who are using a double negative in the full knowledge that it makes a finely-shaded affirmative, I say, pish tosh! I still say it is a needlessly affected form which, no matter how thin it is sliced, is not unlike baloney.