Prose by Any Other Name: A Context for Teaching the Rhetoric of Titles

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Only a few composition textbooks delve deeply or widely into the topic of selecting titles for written works. Indeed, some rhetorics unfortunately give the impression that assigning titles is a necessary evil or a mere convention. But even the few rhetorics that do recognize that titling is both difficult and often crucial to both writer and reader cannot do justice to the real worth of titles, and there is no treatise devoted to the art of fashioning or constructing titles. Students are rarely shown how to create titles and, as readers, how to construe titles as a vital element in understanding the works they cover. In order to provide composition instructors a context for teaching the rhetoric of titles, I have explored the subject, using examples from works of fiction and nonfiction intended for the literate general reader.

Titles and the Composing Process

First, it may be worth noting that some of the most distinguished works would not be recognized by their original titles. For example, here are titles which, among others, were seriously considered for novels that have since become known as classics: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Boy Who Killed His Mother (Tender Is the Night); Ernest Hemingway, The Undiscovered Country (For Whom the Bell Tolls); James Joyce, Mr. Hunter's Day (Ulysses); D.H. Lawrence, Tenderness (Lady Chatterley's Lover); Leo Tolstoy, All's Well That Ends Well (War and Peace); and Thomas Wolfe, O Lost (Look Homeward, Angel). Some of these original titles were working titles, serving the function of sustaining writing in progress.

Many professional authors have been greatly or even obsessively concerned about their titles. For example, Hemingway made lists of as many as forty-three titles, derived mostly from Ecclesiastes and The Oxford Book of English Verse, for what finally became A Farewell to Arms. The World's Room, which occurs on the manuscript and on three other lists, was a working title throughout most of the composition. It derived from a famous ballad, "Edward, Edward," that Hemingway found in The Oxford Book (Oldsey, Hemingway's Hidden 17). In a letter to Hemingway, his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, successfully persuaded the author not to try to improve the title For Whom the Bell Tolls, but Perkins failed to persuade him to change Green Hills of Africa to In the Highlands of Africa.
Hemingway’s explanation of how he arrived at his titles is instructive. An interviewer asked Hemingway, “Do the titles come to you while you’re in the process of doing the story?” Hemingway replied, “No. I make a list of titles after I’ve finished the story or book—sometimes as many as a hundred. Then I start eliminating them, sometimes all of them” (Plimpton 235). He did not add that he often circulated them among his friends to help him in the selection process. In his reply to the interviewer, Hemingway was probably referring to the final titles since he relied greatly on working titles to keep him on track.

In contrast, Graham Greene always titles his books before beginning to write because, he claims, he is “incapable of working on anything unnamed” (Harris 31). Greene’s remark conveys an important truth about titles: they give identity to a developing text at any stage of the writing process. Titles stand for something; they name a subject or theme and move toward grasping it. Successive titles often reflect an author’s creative progress and help the writer focus and concretize his or her thoughts. Thus, even a provisional title functions as a mechanism for invention. When successful, the title also affords the reader some kind of insight into the work, and, thus, authors are especially interested in titling their works. Not only does the title establish first contact with the reader, but it can describe the work, indicate its genre, suggest its mood, or reflect its essential thrust.

At the risk of falling prey to the bugaboo of “intentional fallacy,” I would like to demonstrate the value authors ascribe to titles in communicating with their readers.

Henry David Thoreau’s experience with Walden is an example of how an author’s preference for a title is not always honored. Although the first edition of the work (published by Ticknor and Fields in 1854) carried the title Walden; or, Life in the Woods, Thoreau wrote to his publishers several months before his death and requested they omit “Or, Life in the Woods” from the title page of the new edition (Derleth 199). Ticknor and Fields complied, but most subsequent editions to this day employ the original title. Sherman Paul, in The Shores of America, suggests that Thoreau wanted to drop the subtitle because he feared his audience was taking it too literally and thus losing the more important transcendental philosophy pervading the book (75-76).

Similarly, a change in title was virtually forced upon a now famous novel about the American Air Force in Italy during World War II. Its author, Joseph Heller, submitted the work to Simon and Schuster in 1958 under the title Catch-18, which it had for seven years when the author was working on the book. The publisher scheduled the book for publication in the fall of 1961, but it ran into a catch of its own. A rival publisher announced the forthcoming appearance of Mila 18 by Leon Uris. To avoid confusion, somebody had to give way and this was Heller’s first novel. Heller then retitled the work Catch-14, but the editor, Robert Gottlieb, dis-
liked this appellation and suggested *Catch-22* (Greenfeld 252). Although at first Heller was, in his own words, "heartbroken" because he thought 18 was the number (Golson 412-13), after the novel came out, he got to like the new title because, among other things, many events in the narrative duplicate themselves and a leading submotif is that of déjà vu (Barnard 295). The whole matter would not be especially noteworthy were it not for the fact that the phrase "catch 22" has passed into the language as a byword. In the novel itself, the title phrase recurs frequently and constitutes, in fact, a key to its vision—a catch 22 is the catch by which a seemingly ordered and rational world is rendered absurd.

These cases, besides reflecting the concern authors have for their titles, also suggest the difficulties that sometimes confront them in titling. One task for Maxwell Perkins, a leading editor at Scribner's for more than three decades, was to help authors such as Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, Thomas Wolfe, and, as already mentioned, Hemingway, arrive at the best titles for their works. In a letter to one of his authors, Perkins gives an interesting perspective on titles:

> The title is extremely important, and since there is no logical process by which one may be discovered, it often presents great difficulties. ... We have often had great struggles over a title, and thought it might be a bad one. Then the title has succeeded supremely, and it seemed the only title that was conceivable for it. The title came to fit the book. ... The title should give the quality of the book, if possible—or else it should be appealing, and should reflect the quality of the book after one has read it. (192-94)

Unfortunately, Perkins does not suggest how to create titles. For more concrete help, prospective writers will do well to study, imitate, and adopt the practice of professionals. What kind of titles do they employ? For the purpose of exploration, I have identified four main types of titles: (1) normative, (2) imagistic or figurative, (3) allusive, and (4) special effect.

**Normative Titles**

Predictably, most titles belong to the first group, which I have designated "normative" because they conform to conventional usages of the language. Titles in the normative category span a wide range of grammatical forms, subject specificity, and connotations. As to grammatical form, the tradition of employing prepositional phrases as captions, begun by Michel de Montaigne, has continued since the sixteenth century. Titles like Montaigne's "Of Repentance" and Francis Bacon's "Of Studies" find their counterparts not only in essays like J.B.S. Haldane's "On Being the Right Size" or Joan Didion's "In Bed," but in fiction as well: *In His Steps* by Charles Monroe Sheldon and *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham. This category also includes participial or infinitive phrases: "Concerning the Unpredictable" by W.H. Auden and "To Defend the Rights of the Helpless" by Eunice Shriver. Similar to this type—and perhaps even more frequent—are titles consisting of a noun preceded by
an attributive adjective: "The Passenger Pigeon" by John James Audubon and "The Library Card" by Richard Wright.

In addition, some authors use declarative statements, such as "Pain Is the Ultimate Enemy" by Norman Cousins and Dreams Die First by Harold Robbins. Some use questions, such as "Is God Hard to Find?" by Bishop Fulton Sheen and "Who Killed King Kong?" by X. J. Kennedy. Others use imperatives, such as Wake Up and Live by Dorothea Brande and "Take It Easy" by Damon Runyon.

Almost too common are titles formed by a simple noun—The Group by Mary McCarthy and "Graduation" by Maya Angelou—or names of a person or place. Sinclair Lewis, for example, uses the names of the main characters for many of his novels, and James Michener employs the names of places for his panoramic accounts of countries and states.

Quite a few other authors rely on formulaic titles. Books in Print contains thirty pages of four columns each, listing in each column about thirty-five titles that begin with "How to." Other examples of formulaic titles are those beginning "The Man Who" or "The Woman Who." These usually apply to fiction. The Short-Story Index lists thirty-six stories prefaced by "The Man Who," the first one being F. Owen's "The Man Who Amazed Fish." There is a smaller number of stories whose first words are "The Woman Who"; the initial entry is W. Duranty's "The Woman Who Could Not Sleep." Further, some titles follow a slightly different formula, such as those of books in a series that often have the same main character. A good illustration of this genre is the twenty-one-book Tarzan series by Edgar Rice Burroughs, beginning with Tarzan of the Apes. Other examples of this type of formula are the series by Harry Kemelman who, starting with Friday the Rabbi Slept Late in 1964, has already run out of days, and a series like that of Lawrence Sanders, who still has three "deadly sins" to go.

Besides assuming a great variety of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, normative titles can also vary in degree of specificity. Familiar essays so much in vogue during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those beginning with "Of" or "On" or "Discourse Concerning," name a subject but neither limit nor particularize it. But essays and journalistic articles today tend to bear titles that tell the reader more accurately what to expect.

Normative titles may be relatively denotative, as most of the previous examples are, or highly attitudinal, such as the following: "The Failure of the Criminal Justice System" by Seymour Wishman, "Protection from the Prying Camera" by Ellen Goodman, or "The Nightmare of Life without Fuel" by Isaac Asimov.

Imagistic Titles

More common to fiction than nonfiction are imagistic titles—those that embody figures of speech or images that involve change or extension in the literal or obvious meaning of words. For example, let me illustrate titles employing the more familiar figures—those of opposition (oxymoron,
paradox), analogy (simile, metaphor), allegory, symbol, irony, and pun.

An essay whose title has become such a familiar phrase that the oxymoron embodied in it is seldom noticed is Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," in which the incongruous ideas of "disobedience" and "civility" are juxtaposed. Titles employed for the manifesto during the author's lifetime—"On the Relation of the Individual to the State" (1846) and "Resistance to Civil Government" (1848)—were more prosaic than "Civil Disobedience," a heading given to it four years after Thoreau's death in a collection of his pieces on topics of public interest (Harding 206-07).

Today's writers rarely compose titles using the "comparative" or "figure of likeness," as Renaissance rhetoricians like Thomas Wilson or George Puttenham call it. One example, though, is Joseph Heller's Good as Gold. In this satiric portrayal of higher education, changes are explicitly rung on the title phrase in at least five important instances, all of which give a personal and metaphoric turn to it.

In cases in which metaphor expands into larger images like allegory or symbolism, the title often does not reveal its metaphorical nature at first glance. For instance, even though no one needs to be told anymore, Pilgrim's Progress is not just the story of a journey but of the life of a Christian from conversion to death. As a title, even The Scarlet Letter has no surface metaphorical or symbolic meaning. The reader soon learns, however, that the embroidered letter "A" which Hester Prynne is forced to wear stands for "Adultery," although other possibilities are "Angel" and "Able." The narrator himself never specifies what the letter stands for. That it is the overriding symbol, however, the reader is never allowed to forget because the narrator refers to it in one way or another on the average of once every two pages. All told, Hawthorne alludes to this symbol 150 times (Schubert 141-42), and by the end of the novel, he manages almost to bury the reader under it.

Despite its near ubiquity, the full impact of Hawthorne's title, as is true of virtually all titles employing symbols, is not realized until the reader has completed the work. In this regard, Maxwell Perkins's point that titles have a retrospective as well as a prospective function is certainly relevant. For instance, the presence of a symbol is not immediately apparent in the title of Thornton Wilder's novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey. The title might seem at the outset to refer to a literal bridge over a gorge between Lima and Cuzco. (Indeed, if you go to Peru, the local guide will gladly point it out to you.) But one needs to read the entire novel to be wholly aware that the fictional bridge stands for abstract, even metaphysical, concepts. The most important of these is confirmed by the unspoken thoughts of the Abbess, Madre Maria del Pilar: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning" (235).

Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" employs in its title another trope: irony. The African hunter's life was certainly short, but the reader may well wonder how "happy" it was, inasmuch as Macomber is shot through the back of the neck by his wife Margot. The
ending could probably be termed "happy" or at least fitting in that Macomber is killed at the very moment when he is displaying, for the first time, manly courage of a high order. Of the sixteen possible titles Hemingway drew up for the tale, one was "The Short Life of Francis Macomber" (Oldsey, "Hemingway's Beginnings" 232). The adjective "happy" gives the titles its cutting edge, but even that twist of double entendre was discarded when Hollywood made a movie based on the story and dubbed it *The Macomber Case*.

The pun is probably the most common trope appearing in titles. As one might anticipate, novels and short stories exploit this type of wit more commonly than do nonfiction works. Spinners of detective, adventure, and mystery tales, in particular, appear to vie with one another to see who can create the most ingenious or, if you will, egregious punning titles. Steven Gilbar, in *The Book Book*, furnishes a generous sampling of these under the heading "Whopunits." In the "Top 10" are such whimsies as *Morgue the Merrier* and *3 Short Biers*; among the "runners-up" are *Abracadaver* and *You Leave Me Cold*. A listing under "Dead to Writes" includes *Dead Giveaway* and *Dead Reckoning* (129). Writers of nonfiction also sometimes use words with two different significations simultaneously. One instance is Wayne Booth's "Boring from Within: The Art of the Freshman Essay." Here the play is on "boring" as inducing tedium, on the one hand, and working from an interior position to achieve an objective, on the other.

**Allusive Titles**

Titles I call "allusive" quote from or are indebted to literary or other antecedents. Overall, the favorite source of quotations for use in book titles is the plays of Shakespeare. Titles in this third category appear to group roughly into three types in terms of the way authors have chosen to signal their allusive element to the reader. The degree of connectedness ranges from direct to implicit. From most overt to least, the subgroups may be designated as follows: (1) exact quotations containing the title phrase, appearing as epigraphs; (2) exact quotations from the text itself, either in dialogue or narration; and (3) allusions not specifically cited anywhere in the work.

John Steinbeck employs allusive titles in five of his twenty-three books. On the front flyleaf of *In Dubious Battle*, for example, Steinbeck prints a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, part of the speech of defiance by the fallen archangel, Satan. The relevant lines are:

> and, me preferring,  
> His utmost power with adverse power opposed  
> In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven  
> And shook his throne. (1.102-05)
Between Milton's epic and Steinbeck's novel about the strike of migratory fruit pickers, there are both parallels and contrasts. In both cases, the outcome of the struggle is in doubt, although the power of the "Establishment" is superior. Both Satan and Jim, the labor leader and protagonist of the novel, suffer defeat. Satan and his cohorts are hurled from Heaven down to "bottomless perdition"; Jim is murdered and the strike is lost. In the two works, the rightness of the causes as well as their outcomes are dubious. While Satan, it is true, raised the standard of revolt against the Almighty out of pride, his courage and dignity elicit admiration to the point that some critics have called him the hero of the epic. In the case of Jim, first the protégé and later the leader of the old Marxist, Mac, the immediate cause for which he enlisted is a humanitarian one: to raise wages and improve working conditions. But during the course of events, the means—violence and dehumanization of individuals—become subservient to the ends. The result of the union leaders' rationalizing cruelty and violence as the only means to a just end is the loss of a timeless sacredness, which is certainly applicable to Satan's endeavors as well. There can be little doubt that Steinbeck had in mind such transcendent issues as these when he assigned the name to his work.

In *Lie Down in Darkness* by William Styron, another novel with strong religious overtones, the connection with the earlier work from which its title is drawn does not appear to be so close as in the Steinbeck narrative. The first page of Styron's work is preceded by an eight-line passage from the final chapter of Sir Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658). The immediate justification for Styron's title is that the novel opens with a scene in which Milton Loftis follows a hearse carrying his beautiful daughter Peyton, a suicide, to her grave. But beyond this overt identification between the title and Browne's subject of death, there lies a more embracing relationship. The epigraph speaks to the old themes of the futility of monuments, the vanity of human life, and the philosophy that since the longest life is like the short sunlight of a winter's day, humans should be content merely to have existed. These motifs are implicit in Styron's narrative. Invested as it is with exploring varied spiritual concerns and chronicling human frustrations, disappointments, and tragedies, the novel merits kinship with Browne's book.

When passages containing the title phrase of a work are displayed prominently as epigraphs in the manner just shown, readers naturally look for a connection as they read. But in the second subdivision of allusive titles, where an epigraph is lacking but where the titles duplicate exactly the dialogue, narration, or exposition in the ensuing text, readers may not be so prone to assume a close correlation between label and contents. Usually, however, when the title phrase is drawn directly from a passage spoken by one of the characters or by the narrator, the likelihood of the title's reflecting a leading element of theme, plot, or setting is strong. This favorite device by authors—using a phrase or clause from the interior of their work—is well illustrated in novels by the late John D. MacDonald.
In all twenty-one of his thrillers featuring Travis McGee, the titles, besides containing a color word to signify the series, are exact quotations from the text itself. They sometimes partially disclose the thematic thrust (A Deadly Shade of Gold, Pale Gray for Guilt). At other times, they prefigure a memorable aspect of scene (The Empty Copper Sea, A Purple Place for Dying) or of character (The Quick Red Fox). Often, the titles focus on crucial as well as sensational aspects of the events (A Tan and Sandy Silence, Free Fall in Crimson).

As I mentioned, when a title derives from a passage appearing somewhere in a work, readers ordinarily must read part or all of the volume before they can gauge its applicability or effectiveness. Yet the context usually yields some clue as to how the title is to be understood. With the third subclass of allusive titles—those that derive from a scribal or oral antecedent not present in the text itself—readers are on their own in assessing the extent to which the title relates to the contents. Yet readers usually are justified in assuming that cover and contents correspond. Titles in this group are typically drawn from proverbs and well-known quotations.

Writers of both fiction and nonfiction exploit titles with such recognition value. Here are some novels that make use of such titles: Louis L'Amour's The Quick and the Dead (1 Pet. 4:5; 2 Tim. 4:1; Apostles' Creed); Ian Fleming's You Only Live Twice (variant to proverb); Leslie Ford's False to Any Man (Hamlet 1.3.79-80); Liza Fosburgh's With Friends Like These... (proverb); and Edward Lustgarten's One More Unfortunate (Thomas Hood, "The Bridge of Sighs").

Writers of nonfiction using allusive titles whose phrasing does not appear in the text sometimes alter the original allusion to give their titles an ironic twist or to highlight the central point in their work. Here are just a few examples: Robert Crichton's "Across the River and Into the Prose," a parody of Hemingway's Across the River and Into the Trees, which itself was based on General Stonewall Jackson's final words after being mortally wounded; Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night, from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"; John Medelman's "The Immense Journey of Loren Eiseley," from Loren Eiseley's The Immense Journey; Mary Leakey's "Footprints in the Ashes of Time," from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life"; and Andrew Ward's "They Also Serve Who Stand and Serve Themselves," from Milton's "On His Blindness."

One final example of an allusive title whose phrasing derives entirely from outside the work it labels is Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. In 1932, when the novel appeared, probably only a small percentage of readers recognized the locution "brave new world" as coming from Shakespeare's The Tempest. In the final act of Shakespeare's comedy, the major conspirators are assembled into the charmed circle before the cell of Prospero, an exile whose dukedom of Milan had long before been usurped by his wicked brother Antonio. When Prospero's rather naive daughter Miranda first sees the new group, she exclaims:
O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't! (5.1.183-86)

The irony of Miranda's wonderment was doubtless apparent to the bard's audience when the play was first performed at Whitehall. They knew she was looking at an uncle who had conspired to seize her father's throne, two would-be fratricides, and a senile courtier. So, too, is Huxley's title ironic. The introduction of John, the savage (or natural man), by Bernard Marx of the Psychological Bureau sets the stage for the exposure of science as the very opposite of a panacea for human ills. In the dénouement, Helmholz, the "Alpha plus" friend of Bernard, goes into exile; Bernard himself must be drugged and then dragged away, and John, maddened by the soulless horror of the new order, is driven to suicide. So much for the brave new world!

**Special Effect Titles**

The "special effect" title is the last of the four main categories into which, for purposes of convenience and order, I have grouped titles. The vast majority of titles fit within the three categories I have thus far discussed—normative, figurative, and allusive. Yet, a small percentage of titles fit but uneasily if at all into these categories, and they call attention to themselves as being rather unusual in one respect or another, even though the difference between them and the preceding three groups may be more a matter of degree than kind—titles, for example, like those Tom Wolfe characteristically chooses. Most readers will blink twice, I imagine, when they encounter "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!") from Wolfe's book with an equally outré caption, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby. This satiric commentary on the psychedelic ambiance of America's most improbable city is aptly anticipated and reflected by the bizarre title of the opening essay. Two later books by Wolfe also employ "special effect" titles: The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test and Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flake Catchers.

I'd like to discuss just two more titles that differ sufficiently from the conventional to be virtually sui generis. Perhaps these titles could be considered "allusive" because they contain a quotation from the text or "figurative"because they represent a type of modification in language akin to a pun or, more picturesquely, a "mondegreen." This later is a term coined by Sylvia Wright, who recalls how as a child she construed a line of the ballad "The Bonny Earl of Murray" as "'They hae slain the Earl Ammuray,/ And Lady Mondegreen," instead of "'They hae slain the Earl of Murray/And hae laid him on the green" (48-49).

The titles for two selections that strike me as being quite curious are "I Led the Pigeons to the Flag" by William Safire and "I Wants to Go to the Prose" by Suzanne B. Jordan. Both titles are "mondegreens"—odd changes readers or listeners make in the intended meaning of what they see or
hear. The essay by Safire on the common linguistic phenomenon of verbal misconstruction gives an example of school children frequently saluting Old Glory each morning with "I pledge a legion to the flag" or "I led the pigeons to the flag." The piece by Jordan excoriates what she sees as the frequent abandonment of standards by teachers, counselors, and administrators. Her classic example, presented as a kind of climax, concerns a student in her composition class who was a "very, very good football player in high school, so good that he never failed a course." Yet, in a college theme, he had written with blithe confidence, "I wants to go to the prose and comes famous." As is evident from such unusual titles, when appropriately employed, their very piquancy can be a real plus.

A Final Note

This presentation is meant to provide a relatively broad and detailed context to enable teachers to help students understand an important aspect of the writing process. As I mentioned, the rhetoric of titles and titling has received scant attention in critical and pedagogical literature. And sometimes what has been promulgated is misleading. For instance, one author of a composition text that I will not name advises students, "Think of a title as a nice completing touch. It is rather like frosting on a cake. Though it does not really affect the texture of the product, it gives gloss and finish." This statement is probably appropriate for baking cakes (I wouldn't know), but it runs counter to my findings; professional writers, publishers, and others concerned with good communication tend to agree that titling is an integral part of the composing process, not a mere process of decoration. One critic, after carefully analyzing thirty-three titles Hemingway considered before choosing A Farewell to Arms, concludes, "Actually, the titles under consideration, as well as their sources, had considerable influence on the making of the novel" (Oldsey, Hemingway's Hidden 22). Without doubt, the novelist himself would have concurred.

In "What Every Writer Must Learn," John Ciardi avers that "no writer can produce good writing without a sure sense of what has been accomplished in the past within his form" (258). Ciardi's dictum applies as much to selecting a title as to every other facet of writing. Accordingly, I have illustrated four major categories of titles from various kinds of published prose. The examples of titles I have cited, as well as others readily gleaned from literary works, are available for students as models to peruse, imitate, and invent from, for, as Ciardi says, "Creativity is the imaginatively gifted recombination of known elements into something new" (252-53). Encouraged and guided by instructors convinced of the crucial role titles play in the reading and writing processes, apprentice writers may come to share Hemingway's philosophy: "With enough time you can always get a good title. The hell of it is that you always have a lot that seems good and it takes time to tell which is right" (386).

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