“I’d like a shower. Tiring day,” say Flyboy.
Then Sugar surprises me by sayin’, “You know, Miss Moore, I don’t
think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs.”
And Miss Moore lights up like somebody goosed her. “And?” she say,
urging Sugar on. Only I’m standin’ on her foot so she don’t continue.

“Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people
can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven.
What do you think?”

“I think,” say Sugar pushing me off her feet like she never done be-
fore, cause I whip her ass in a minute, “that this is not much of a democ-

cracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal
crack at the dough, don’t it?” Miss Moore is besides herself and I am dis-
gusted with Sugar’s treachery. So I stand on her foot one more time to
see if she’ll shove me. She shuts up, and Miss Moore looks at me, sor-
rowfully I’m thinkin’. And somethin’ weird is goin’ on, I can feel it in my

chest.

“Anybody else learn anything today?” lookin’ dead at me. I walk
away and Sugar has to run to catch up and don’t even seem to notice
when I shrug her arm off my shoulder.

“Well, we got four dollars anyway,” she says.

“Un huh.”

“We could go to Hascombs and get half a chocolate layer and then go
to the Sunset and still have plenty money for potato chips and ice cream
sodas.”

“Uh huh.”

“Race you to Hascombs,” she say.

We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me
cause I’m going to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this
day through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain’t no-
obody gonna beat me at nuthin’.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing
1. What is the point of Miss Moore’s lesson? Why does Sylvia resist it?
2. Describe the relationship between Sugar and Sylvia. What is Sugar’s func-
tion in the story?
3. What does the last line of the story suggest?

A Proposal to Abolish Grading

Let half a dozen of the prestigious Universities—Chicago, Stanford,
the Ivy League—abolish grading, and use testing only and entirely for
pedagogic purposes as teachers see fit.

Anyone who knows the frantic temper of the present schools will un-
derstand the transvaluation of values that would be effected by this mod-
est innovation. For most of the students, the competitive grade has come
to be the essence. The naive teacher points to the beauty of the subject and
the ingenuity of the research; the shrewd student asks if he is responsible
for that on the final exam.

Let me at once dispose of an objection whose unanimity is quite fas-
cinating. I think that the great majority of professors agree that grading hin-
ders teaching and creates a bad spirit, going as far as cheating and plagiari-
zizing. I have before me the collection of essays, Examining in Harvard
College, and this is the consensus. It is uniformly asserted, however, that
the grading is inevitable; for how else will the graduate schools, the foun-
dations, the corporations know whom to accept, reward, hire? How will
the talent scouts know whom to tap?

By testing the applicants, of course, according to the specific task-
requirements of the inducing institution, just as applicants for the Civil
Service or for licenses in medicine, law, and architecture are tested. Why
should Harvard professors do the testing for corporations and
graduate-schools?

The objection is ludicrous. Dean Whitla, of the Harvard Office of
Tests, points out that the scholastic-aptitude and achievement tests used
for admission to Harvard are a super-excellent index for all-around
Harvard performance, better than high-school grades or particular
Harvard course-grades. Presumably, these college-entrance tests are

tailed for what Harvard and similar institutions want. By the same logic, would not an employer do far better to apply his own job-aptitude test rather than to rely on the vagaries of Harvard sectionmen? Indeed, I doubt that many employers bother to look at such grades; they are more likely to be interested merely in the fact of a Harvard diploma, whatever that connotes to them. The grades have most of their weight with the graduate schools—here, as elsewhere, the system runs mainly for its own sake.

It is really necessary to remind our academics of the ancient history of Examination. In the medieval university, the whole point of the grueling trial of the candidate was whether or not to accept him as a peer. His disputation and lecture for the Master’s was just that, a masterpiece to enter the guild. It was not to make comparative evaluations. It was not to weed out and select for an extra-mural licensor or employer. It was certainly not to pit one young fellow against another in an ugly competition. My philosopistic impression is that the medievals thought they knew what a good job of work was and that we are competitive because we do not know. But the more status is achieved by largely irrelevant competitive evaluation, the less will we ever know.

(Of course, our American examinations never did have this purely guild orientation, just as our faculties have rarely had absolute autonomy; the examining was to satisfy Overseers, Elders, distant Regents—and they as paternal superiors have always clotted on giving grades, rather than accepting peers. But I submit that this set-up itself makes it impossible for the student to become a master, to have grown up, and to commence on his own. He will always be making A or B for some overseer. And in the present atmosphere, he will always be climbing on his friend’s neck.)

Perhaps the chief objectors to abolishing grading would be the students and their parents. The parents should be simply disregarded; their anxiety has done enough damage already. For the students, it seems to me that a primary duty of the university is to deprive them of their props, their dependence on extrinsic valuation and motivation, and to force them to confront the difficult enterprise itself and finally lose themselves in it.

A miserable effect of grading is to nullify the various uses of testing. Testing, for both student and teacher, is a means of structuring, and also of finding out what is blank or wrong and what has been assimilated and can be taken for granted. Review—including high-pressure review—is a means of bringing together the fragments, so that there are flashes of synoptic insight.

There are several good reasons for testing, and kinds of test. But if the aim is to discover weakness, what is the point of down-grading and punishing it, and thereby inviting the student to conceal his weakness, by faking and bulling, if not cheating? The natural conclusion of synthesis is the insight itself, not a grade for having had it. For the important purpose of placement, if one can establish in the student the belief that one is testing not to grade and make invidious comparisons but for his own advantage, the student should normally seek his own level, where he is challenged and yet capable, rather than trying to get by. If the student dares to accept himself as he is, a teacher’s grade is a crude instrument compared with a student’s self-awareness. But it is rare in our universities that students are encouraged to notice objectively their vast confusion. Unlike Socrates, our teachers rely on power-drives rather than shame and ingenious idealism.

Many students are lazy, so teachers try to good or threaten them by grading. In the long run this must do more harm than good. Laziness is a character-defense. It may be a way of avoiding learning, in order to protect the conceit that one is already perfect (deeper, the despair that one never can). It may be a way of avoiding just the risk of failing and being down-graded. Sometimes it is a way of politely saying, “I won’t.” But since it is the authoritarian grown-up demands that have created such attitudes in the first place, why repeat the trauma? There comes a time when we must treat people as adult, laziness and all. It is one thing courageously to fire a do-nothing out of your class; it is quite another thing to evaluate him with a lordly F.

Most important of all, it is often obvious that balking in doing the work, especially among bright young people who get to great universities, means exactly what it says: The work does not suit me, not this subject, or not at this time, or not in this school, or not in school altogether. The student might not be bookish; he might be school-tired; perhaps his development ought now to take another direction. Yet unfortunately, if such a student is intelligent and is not sure of himself, he can be bullied into passing, and this obscures everything. My hunch is that I am describing a common situation. What a grim waste of young life and teacherly effort! Such a student will retain nothing of what he has “passed” in. Sometimes he must get mononucleosis to tell his story and be believed.

And ironically, the converse is also probably commonly true. A student flunks and is mechanically weeded out, who is really ready and eager to learn in a scholastic setting, but he has not quite caught on. A good teacher can recognize the situation, but the computer wreaks its will.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. In his opening paragraph Goodman limits his suggestion about grading and testing to “half a dozen of the prestigious Universities.” Does he offer any reason for this limitation? Can you?