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Learning Assertiveness through Literature: An Analytical Exploration of the Short Story '*The Verger*'

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Abstract

Assertiveness, a key life skill, enables individuals to express their needs and decisions with confidence and respect. Literature offers valuable models of such behaviour, as seen in Somerset Maugham's *The Verger*. This study examines the assertive qualities of Albert Edward Foreman, who loses his job due to illiteracy yet responds with calm self-assurance. Instead of yielding to despair, he stands by his principles, thinks clearly, and identifies a new opportunity. His quick, confident decision to start a business led to remarkable success, demonstrating how assertiveness can transform setbacks into progress. The paper highlights how literary narratives can effectively teach life skills like assertiveness, helping readers navigate challenges with clarity and confidence.

Keywords: Assertiveness, Confidence, Decisions, Illiteracy, Self-Assurance

INTRODUCTION

Assertiveness is widely recognised as a vital interpersonal skill that enables individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and needs in a clear, respectful, and confident manner. Rooted in psychological and communication theories, assertiveness is often viewed as a balanced approach to interaction—one that lies between passive behaviour, where individuals hesitate to express themselves, and aggressive behaviour, where they impose their views on others. Researchers such as Alberti and Emmons have emphasised that assertiveness contributes significantly to emotional well-being, self-esteem, and healthy social functioning. In both personal and professional contexts, assertive communication fosters clarity, mutual respect, and effective decision-making. However, when individuals lack assertiveness, they encounter numerous challenges that affect their mental health, relationships, and personal growth. Non-assertive behaviour often results in suppressed emotions, heightened stress, and imbalanced interactions, making it difficult for individuals to advocate for themselves or maintain healthy boundaries. Understanding these disadvantages is essential for recognising the importance of assertiveness training, especially in educational and developmental settings.

WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?

The concept of Assertiveness emerged in the mid-20th century. Stubbs (1985) asserts that assertive behaviour is a behaviour that specifies the rights of the individual while respecting the feelings and rights of others. It is described that assertiveness is a behaviour, not a personality. It is a self-expression of respecting one's own feelings and opinions. According to Wolpe (1958), assertiveness is "the effective communication of personal thoughts and feelings in interpersonal encounters in a fashion that respects and regards the thoughts and feelings of others". Assertiveness behaviour doesn't refer to arrogance or egotism, but it is a friendly expression of either suggestion or disagreement. Wolpe treated his patients with relaxing

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training of assertion by which they can be free from unnecessary anxiety and pressure, or depression. Alberti defined assertiveness as "behaviour which enables a person to act in his own best interest, stand up for himself without undue anxiety and to express his rights without destroying the rights of others". Thus, assertiveness is a skill which can be used for fostering positive interpersonal relationships.

Assertiveness vs Aggressiveness

Assertiveness is an expression of one's own opinions and needs with due respect for others' rights. It is calm, clear, and balanced communication. Aggressiveness, on the other hand, involves expressing oneself in a forceful or hostile way that violates others' rights, often leading to conflict or hurt feelings. Aggressiveness is to control the situation or to show dominance, while assertiveness shows respect for both parties. Hence, Assertiveness can be effectively developed with conscious efforts.

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned and developed. It is not an inborn trait; rather, it improves with awareness, practice, and consistent effort. People can become more assertive by understanding their rights, building self-confidence, practising clear communication, and learning how to express feelings and needs respectfully. Individuals can gradually replace passive or aggressive patterns with assertive behaviour through techniques such as role-playing, feedback, self-reflection, and guided training. This makes assertiveness a trainable and achievable skill for anyone willing to work on it. Literature mirrors life as it reflects the culture, values and morals of the society. While studying literature or literary texts, students can relate stories to their life experiences. They can correlate the literary situations with their real-life situation; subsequently, readers enjoy reading the literary works and try to learn from them more creatively.

Literary narratives can be an effective tool for teaching life skills such as assertiveness. Through characters, conflicts, dialogues, and resolutions, literature provides relatable situations that help readers observe how individuals express their needs, set boundaries, or handle difficult interactions. By analysing character behaviour and reflecting on moral choices, learners can understand the difference between passive, assertive, and aggressive responses. Stories also create a safe space for discussion, self-reflection, and emotional engagement, making it easier for readers to internalise assertive communication. Thus, literature serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a meaningful medium for developing practical life skills. The fictional narratives have a meaningful relationship with assertiveness, as these forms can portray assertive characters and inspire assertiveness among readers. Stories and novels with their narrative structure try to delineate human experiences, including the dynamics of assertiveness. It permits the reader to look at the world from a different perspective. Literature helps to analyse a wide range of texts, with which readers can develop their understanding of human nature and behaviour.

Short story *The Verger* by Somerset Maugham is a tale of a simple man who does his duties as a verger with great joy and devotion at St. Peter's Church, Neville Square. For sixteen years, Foreman has carried out his duties with remarkable pride, discipline, and dedication. The conflict in the story begins when a new, young, and progressive vicar arrives—someone who values modern standards such as literacy. When the vicar discovers that Foreman cannot read or write, he, along with the churchwarden, brings this to Foreman's notice and tells him, "We've got something rather unpleasant to say to you. You've been here a great many years, and I think his lordship and the general agree with me that you've fulfilled the duties of your office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned." (*The Verger 19*) Foreman face betrays no sign of embarrassment, but he boldly replies that "The last vicar knew that sir". He has not tried to hide the truth or manipulate it but accepts his inability to read and write he adds, "It didn't make no difference," he debates with the authority and tells them that he neither had time to learn reading and writing and nor he felt the need for it.

The new vicar adamantly tells his decision firmly to Foreman, "he debates with the authority and tells them that he neither had time to learn reading and writing nor did he feel the need for it. Well, I've talked the matter over with these gentlemen, and they quite agree with me that the situation is impossible. At a church like St. Peter's, Neville Square, we cannot have a verger who can neither read nor write". (20) Albert Edward becomes restless as the new vicar fails to recognise his commitment towards his work and just focuses on his illiteracy. New vicar tells him, "I have no complaint to make against you. You do your work quite satisfactorily, but we have not the right to take the risk of some accident that might happen……. It's a matter of prudence as well as pf principle." (20) The officer asks him to learn the skills of reading and writing. Foreman, a dignified man proud of his 16 years of meticulous service, calmly but firmly refuses to be forced into changing who he is at his age. He chooses resignation over compromising his self-respect he tells the general, "No, sir, I'M afraid I couldn't, not now. You see, I'm not as young as I was and if I couldn't seem able to get the letters in me 'ead when I was a nipper I don't think there's much chance of it now." (20) The new vicar tries to convince Foreman and gives him ultimatum by telling him that, "The churchwardens and I have quite made up our minds. We'll give you three months and if at the end of that time you cannot read and write I'm afraid you'll have to go." (21) At new vicar's proposal Foreman steadily replies,

I'm sorry, sir, I am afraid it's no good. I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. I've lived a good many good years without knowing how to read and write, and without wishing to praise myself, self-praise is no recommendation, I don't mind say' I've done my duty in that state of life in which it' as pleased a merciful providence to place me, and if I could learn now I don't know as I'd want to." (21)

He asserts his self-worth, stating that he has performed his duties impeccably for sixteen years without those reading and writing skills, and he has no reason to alter what has long proven effective, choosing instead to value his experience and proven competence over the newly imposed expectations of the church authorities. Instead of aggression, he strongly but calmly asserts his refusal and resignation to the rigid demands of the church hierarchy. He expressed his assertiveness through self-dignity, self-assurance and firmness to stand by his principles and capacities. Rather than reacting with fear or despair after losing the position he held for so many years, he maintains his composure and reflects carefully on what to do next. He neither protests nor expresses bitterness; instead, he quickly shifts his focus to planning his future. This steady, thoughtful reaction in a moment of crisis reveals his self-discipline and his assertive readiness to steer his life in a new direction.

Instead of feeling dejected and lingering on his misfortune, while walking on the streets, he quickly notices a fresh possibility. He realises that there is a gap in the market—a tobacconist's shop, since no one nearby sells "fags." Seizing this insight, he promptly decides to act on it, demonstrating a clear and assertive ability to turn ideas into action. This perception led him to take a confident leap, investing his savings in a business—a bold, assertive step that marks his pursuit of growth. Foreman starts a shop and sets up in business as a tobacconist and newsagent. Albert Edward does very well, expands his business to ten shops, and eventually becomes highly successful.

In developing a flourishing business of ten tobacconist shops while illiterate, Foreman's impressive resourcefulness and intelligence were grounded in experience. By relying on common sense and a deep understanding of others, he shows that self-belief can triumph over institutional rejection. He goes on collecting the cash from all the shops and deposits it into the bank. One morning when he was in the bank with bundle of notes and a bag of silver manager calls him and asks him, "Mr. Foreman, I wanted to have a talk to you about the money you've got on deposit with us. D'you know how much it is?" (23) Bank manager suggests him to invest his money as it is a huge amount, but Foreman replies, "I wouldn't want to take a risk, sir. I know it's safe in the bank." Even after becoming a wealthy man, he remains grounded and does not boast about his accomplishments. When the manager tells

him they will handle all the formalities of investments just he will just have to sign the transfer papers. Without hesitating, he asks," I could do that all right, said Albert uncertainly. "But how should I know what I was signin'?" (24) When the bank manager marvels at how far he has come despite being illiterate, Foreman responds modestly by saying that "I'd be verger of St. Peter's, Neville Square" (24) means that had he learned to read and write, he would probably still be working as a verger. It quietly highlights the depth of his transformation. It subtly affirms how far he has come and reveals a character shaped more by resilience and choice than by formal education.

CONCLUSION

Albert Edward Foreman shows assertiveness through his steady confidence, his unwillingness to abandon his principles, and his ability to take initiative when challenges arise. It is this assertive approach that ultimately paves the way for his success as an entrepreneur.

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