The Teaching of Literature

EVERY NOW AND THEN THE NOVELIST LOOKS UP from his work long enough to become aware of a general public dissatisfaction with novelists. There's always a voice coming from somewhere that tells him he isn't doing his duty, and that if he doesn't mend his ways soon, there are going to be no more fiction readers—just as, for all practical purposes, there are now no more poetry readers.

Of course, of all the various kinds of artists, the fiction writer is most deviled by the public. Painters and musicians are protected somewhat since they

don't deal with what everyone knows about, but the fiction writer writes about life, and so anyone living considers himself an authority on it.

I find that everybody approaches the novel according to his particular interest—the doctor looks for a disease, the minister looks for a sermon, the poor look for money, and the rich look for justification; and if they find what they want, or at least what they can recognize, then they judge the piece of fiction to be superior.

In the standing dispute between the novelist and the public, the teacher of English is a sort of middleman, and I have occasionally come to think about what really happens when a piece of fiction is set before students. I suppose this is a terrifying experience for the teacher.

I have a young cousin who told me that she reviewed my novel for her ninth-grade English class, and when I asked—without a trace of gratitude—why she did that, she said, "Because I had to have a book the teacher wouldn't have read." So I asked her what she said about it, and she said, "I said 'My cousin wrote this book.'" I asked her if that was all she said, and she said, "No, I copied the rest off the jacket."

So you see I do approach this problem realistically, knowing that perhaps it has no solution this side of

the grave, but feeling nevertheless that there may be profit in talking about it.

I don't recall that when I was in high school or college, any novel was ever presented to me to study as a novel. In fact, I was well on the way to getting a Master's degree in English before I really knew what fiction was, and I doubt if I would ever have learned then, had I not been trying to write it. I believe that it's perfectly possible to run a course of academic degrees in English and to emerge a seemingly respectable Ph.D. and still not know how to read fiction.

The fact is, people don't know what they are expected to do with a novel, believing, as so many do, that art must be utilitarian, that it must do something, rather than be something. Their eyes have not been opened to what fiction is, and they are like the blind men who went to visit the elephant—each feels a different part and comes away with a different impression.

Now it's my feeling that if more attention, of a technical kind, were paid to the subject of fiction in the schools, even at the high-school level, this situation might be improved.

Of course, I'm in a bad position here. So far as teaching is concerned, I am in a state of pristine innocence. But I do believe that there is still a little common ground between the writer of English and the

teacher of it. If you could eliminate the student from your concern, and I could eliminate the reader from mine, I believe that we should be able to find ourselves enjoying a mutual concern, which would be a love of the language and what can be done with it in the interests of dramatic truth. I believe that this is actually the primary concern of us both, and that you can't serve the student, nor I the reader, unless our aim is first to be true to the subject and its necessities. This is the reason I think the study of the novel in the schools must be a technical study.

It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind. About the turn of the century, Henry James wrote that the young woman of the future, though she would be taken out for airings in a flying-machine, would know nothing of mystery or manners. James had no business to limit the prediction to one sex; otherwise, no one can very well disagree with him. The mystery he was talking about is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery.

Not long ago a teacher told me that her best students feel that it is no longer necessary to write anything. She said they think that everything can be done with figures now, and that what can't be done

with figures isn't worth doing. I think this is a natural belief for a generation that has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate mystery. For such people, fiction can be very disturbing, for the fiction writer is concerned with mystery that is lived. He's concerned with ultimate mystery as we find it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience.

Since this is his aim, all levels of meaning in fiction have come increasingly to be found in the literal level. There is no room for abstract expressions of compassion or piety or morality in the fiction itself. This means that the writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense, and this makes the presentation of fiction to the student, and particularly to the immature student, very difficult indeed.

I don't know how the subject is handled now, or if it is handled at all, but when I went to school I observed a number of ways in which the industrious teacher of English could ignore the nature of literature, but continue to teach the subject.

The most popular of these was simply to teach literary history instead. The emphasis was on what was written when, and what was going on in the world at that time. Now I don't think this is a discipline to be despised. Certainly students need to know these things. The historical sense is greatly in decay. Perhaps students live in an eternal present now, and it's

necessary to get across to them that a Viking ship was not equipped like the *Queen Mary* and that Lord Byron didn't get to Greece by air. At the same time, this is not teaching literature, and it is not enough to sustain the student's interest in it when he leaves school.

Then I found that another popular way to avoid teaching literature was to be concerned exclusively with the author and his psychology. Why was Hawthorne melancholy and what made Poe drink liquor and why did Henry James like England better than America? These ruminations can take up endless time and postpone indefinitely any consideration of the work itself. Actually, a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper, and the more complete the work, the less important it is who wrote it or why. If you're studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life. Psychology is an interesting subject but hardly the main consideration for the teacher of English.

Neither is sociology. When I went to school, a novel might be read in an English class because it represented a certain social problem of topical interest. Good fiction deals with human nature. If it uses material that is topical, it still does not use it for a topical purpose, and if topics are what you want anyway, you are better referred to a newspaper.

But I found that there were times when all these methods became exhausted, and the unfortunate teacher of English was faced squarely with the problem of having to teach literature. This would never do, of course, and what had to be done then was simply to kill the subject altogether. Integrate it out of existence. I once went to a high school where all the subjects were called "activities" and were so well integrated that there were no definite ones to teach. I have found that if you are astute and energetic, you can integrate English literature with geography, biology, home economics, basketball, or fire prevention —with anything at all that will put off a little longer the evil day when the story or novel must be examined simply as a story or novel.

Failure to study literature in a technical way is generally blamed, I believe, on the immaturity of the student, rather than on the unpreparedness of the teacher. I couldn't pronounce upon that, of course, but as a writer with certain grim memories of days and months of just "hanging out" in school, I can at least venture the opinion that the blame may be shared. At any rate, I don't think the nation's teachers of English have any right to be complacent about their service to literature as long as the appearance of a really fine work of fiction is so rare on the best-seller lists, for good fiction is written more often than it is read. I know, or at least I have been given to under-

stand, that a great many high-school graduates go to college not knowing that a period ordinarily follows the end of a sentence; but what seems even more shocking to me is the number who carry away from college with them an undying appreciation for slick and juvenile fiction.

I don't know whether I am setting the aims of the teacher of English too high or too low when I suggest that it is, partly at least, his business to change the face of the best-seller list. However, I feel that the teacher's role is more fundamental than the critic's. It comes down ultimately, I think, to the fact that his first obligation is to the truth of the subject he is teaching, and that for the reading of literature ever to become a habit and a pleasure, it must first be a discipline. The student has to have tools to understand a story or a novel, and these are tools proper to the structure of the work, tools proper to the craft. They are tools that operate inside the work and not outside it; they are concerned with how this story is made and with what makes it work as a story.

You may say that this is too difficult for the student, yet actually, to begin with what can be known in a technical way about the story or the novel or the poem is to begin with the least common denominator. And you may ask what a technical understanding of a novel or poem or story has to do with the business of

mystery, the embodiment of which I have been careful to say is the essence of literature. It has a great deal to do with it, and this can perhaps best be understood in the act of writing.

In the act of writing, one sees that the way a thing is made controls and is inseparable from the whole meaning of it. The form of a story gives it meaning which any other form would change, and unless the student is able, in some degree, to apprehend the form, he will never apprehend anything else about the work, except what is extrinsic to it as literature.

The result of the proper study of a novel should be contemplation of the mystery embodied in it, but this is a contemplation of the mystery in the whole work and not of some proposition or paraphrase. It is not the tracking-down of an expressible moral or statement about life. An English teacher I knew once asked her students what the moral of *The Scarlet Letter* was, and one answer she got was that the moral of *The Scarlet Letter* was, think twice before you commit adultery.

Many students are made to feel that if they can dive deep into a piece of fiction and come up with so edifying a proposition as this, their effort has not been in vain.

I think, to judge from what the nation reads, that most of our effort in the teaching of literature has

been in vain, and I think that this is even more apparent when we listen to what people demand of the novelist. If people don't know what they get, they at least know what they want. Possibly the question most often asked these days about modern fiction is why do we keep on getting novels about freaks and poor people, engaged always in some violent, destructive action, when actually, in this country, we are rich and strong and democratic and the man in the street is possessed of a general good-will which overflows in all directions.

I think that this kind of question is only one of many attempts, unconscious perhaps, to separate mystery from manners in fiction, and thereby to make it more palatable to the modern taste. The novelist is asked to begin with an examination of statistics rather than with an examination of conscience. Or if he must examine his conscience, he is asked to do so in the light of statistics. I'm afraid, though, that this is not the way the novelist uses his eyes. For him, judgment is implicit in the act of seeing. His vision cannot be detached from his moral sense.

Readers have got somewhat out of the habit of feeling that they have to drain off a statable moral from a novel. Now they feel they have to drain off a statable social theory that will make life more worth living. What they wish to eliminate from fiction, at all costs,

is the mystery that James foresaw the loss of. The storyteller must render what he sees and not what he thinks he ought to see, but this doesn't mean that he can't be, or that he isn't, a moralist in the sense proper to him.

It seems that the fiction writer has a revolting attachment to the poor, for even when he writes about the rich, he is more concerned with what they lack than with what they have. I am very much afraid that to the fiction writer the fact that we shall always have the poor with us is a source of satisfaction, for it means, essentially, that he will always be able to find someone like himself. His concern with poverty is with a poverty fundamental to man. I believe that the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation.

One man who read my novel sent me a message by an uncle of mine. He said, "Tell that girl to quit writing about poor folks." He said, "I see poor folks every day and I get mighty tired of them, and when I read, I don't want to see any more of them."

Well, that was the first time it had occurred to me that the people I was writing about were much poorer than anybody else, and I think the reason for this is very interesting, and I think it can perhaps explain a good deal about how the novelist looks at the world.

The novelist writes about what he sees on the sur-

face, but his angle of vision is such that he begins to see before he gets to the surface and he continues to see after he has gone past it. He begins to see in the depths of himself, and it seems to me that his position there rests on what must certainly be the bedrock of all human experience—the experience of limitation or, if you will, of poverty.

Kipling said if you wanted to write stories not to drive the poor from your doorstep. I think he meant that the poor live with less padding between them and the raw forces of life and that for this reason it is a source of satisfaction to the novelist that we shall always have them with us. But the novelist will always have them with him because he can find them anywhere. Just as in the sight of God we are all children, in the sight of the novelist we are all poor, and the actual poor only symbolize for him the state of all men.

When anyone writes about the poor in order merely to reveal their material lack, then he is doing what the sociologist does, not what the artist does. The poverty he writes about is so essential that it needn't have anything at all to do with money.

Of course Kipling, like most fiction writers, was attracted by the manners of the poor. The poor love formality, I believe, even better than the wealthy, but their manners and forms are always being inter-

rupted by necessity. The mystery of existence is always showing through the texture of their ordinary lives, and I'm afraid that this makes them irresistible to the novelist.

A sense of loss is natural to us, and it is only in these centuries when we are afflicted with the doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature by its own efforts that the vision of the freak in fiction is so disturbing. The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state. The only time he should be disturbing to us is when he is held up as a whole man.

That this happens frequently, I cannot deny, but as often as it happens, it indicates a disease, not simply in the novelist but in the society that has given him his values.

Every novelist has his preoccupations, and none can see and write everything. Partial vision has to be expected, but partial vision is not dishonest vision unless it has been dictated. I don't think that we have any right to demand of our novelists that they write an *American* novel at all. A novel that could be described simply as an American novel and no more would be too limited an undertaking for a good novelist to waste his time on. As a fiction writer who is a Southerner, I use the idiom and the manners of the country I know, but I don't consider that I write

about the South. So far as I am concerned as a novelist, a bomb on Hiroshima affects my judgment of life in rural Georgia, and this is not the result of taking a relative view and judging one thing by another, but of taking an absolute view and judging all things together; for a view taken in the light of the absolute will include a good deal more than one taken merely in the light provided by a house-to-house survey.

Total Effect and the Eighth Grade

IN TWO RECENT INSTANCES IN GEORGIA, PARENTS have objected to their eighth- and ninth-grade children's reading assignments in modern fiction. This seems to happen with some regularity in cases throughout the country. The unwitting parent picks up his child's book, glances through it, comes upon passages of erotic detail or profanity, and takes off at once to complain to the school board. Sometimes, as in one of the Georgia cases, the teacher is dismissed and hackles rise in liberal circles everywhere.

The two cases in Georgia, which involved Stein-