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THE BATTLE OF THE BOOK REPORTS.

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GENERAL AGREEMENT CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM HAS IRONICALLY GIVEN RISE TO "A STULTIFYING ACADEMIC GAME"--THE REQUIRED BOOK REPORT. STANDARDS FOR READING BOOKS ARE "CADAVEROUSLY" STEREOTYPED--LONG LISTS OF OUTSIDE READING MATERIAL, AND A SPECIFIED NUMBER OF BOOK REPORTS WHICH INCLUDE SOMETHING ABOUT THE AUTHOR, THE PLOT, THE CHARACTERS' QUALITIES AND FUNCTIONS, THE BOOK'S LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE, AND THE READER'S PERSONAL OPINION. IN CONFUSION, STUDENTS TURN TO "PARAPHRASE" AND "RESEARCH," THUS ASSURING PLAGIARISM. THIS APPROACH TO READING IS CLOSELY ALLIED WITH THE POPULAR SURVEY COURSE IN LITERATURE, IN WHICH AN IMPOSING NUMBER OF AUTHORS AND CENTURIES ARE TOUCHED UPON IN ONE ACADEMIC YEAR. TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BE ORIGINAL AND THOUGHTFUL READERS AND WRITERS, TEACHERS SHOULD (1) BE IMAGINATIVE IN THEIR TEACHING METHODS, (2) GIVE BOOK REPORT ASSIGNMENTS THAT ARE FLEXIBLE AND CREATIVE IN FORMAT, (3) EMPHASIZE "DEPTH STUDIES" WHICH INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE WORK OF A PARTICULAR WRITER, AND (4) MEASURE STUDENTS BY THEIR DEPTH OF PERCEPTION, NOT THEIR BREADTH OF EXPOSURE. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOL. 25 (JANUARY 1968), 1-6.) (JB)

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English Bulletin

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MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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THE BATTLE OF THE BOOK REPORTS

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There is a great game being played in many schools across the nation, a game whose increased popularity has at last made possible a clarification of its rules. The contest usually engages students and teachers of English, who, by tacit agreement and with a certain amount of administrative officiating, take on one another in the battle of the book reports.

It is difficult to establish precisely the point at which the game began, but, in America at least, one might well affix a date somewhere toward the close of the last century when the novel gained recognition as a likely instrument of education. This is not to suggest that the introduction of unreality into the classroom had not been accomplished long before, but that the criteria for such works appears to have been age and that everyone (students and teachers alike) marveled more at the oldness of what they were studying than at its intrinsic worth. Homer and Shakespeare were ancient stalagmites, awesome in their capacity for persistence and even a little frightening in their propensity to increase in size. Indeed, the magnitude of their fictive worlds transcended, as it continues to do, the kind of pedagogical criticism since leveled against many lesser literary lights and precluded any questioning of the value of purely imaginative writing in education. An academic sanctity had been

won that in time cast its glow across twelve centuries of English writers.

When early educators (the avant-garde of their time) were faced with the problem of justifying the misadventures of a young Englishman named Tom Jones in terms of this revered cultural heritage, the evolution of fiction as an integral part of formal learning struck an awkward snag. Certainly Pamela Andrews' frenzied flight from seduction was a pitiful comedown from the wanderings of Ulysses. And Humphry Clinker was no Macbeth. The critical vocabulary that had wreathed the work of Shakespeare and Milton with such lasting epithets as "universal" and "majestic" could scarcely be made applicable to these inventions of banality. The novel appeared to have been born in trivia and preordained chronicler of the world's most frivolous behavior. Whether the virtue of the seraphic Miss Andrews would be spared for another twenty-five pages owned no more than gossipy interest and was most assuredly unworthy of discussion in class.

But the infusion of imaginative literature into the main stream of education, though often subtle, had been wide and deep. The advocates of perception as an end in itself had already won the day; their relentless vanguard merely reassembled to carry in this new literary genre.

Today, the study of fiction has precipitated a different kind of multilateral problem, especially crucial at the secondary level. The novel itself now holds a place of particular prominence and there is general agreement concerning the importance of literature in the curriculum. It is, however, this very concordance of thought that has ironically given rise to the modern scholastic phenomena known as the book report. Here, as in many other facets of our society, widespread harmony has made the full circle, from a united cultural impulse to what constitutes little more than vacuous stereotype. The proponents of fiction in the classroom must awaken to the truth that, in far too many instances, the fruit of their labor is dying on the vine and that the felicitous concept of the high school book report has degenerated into a stultifying academic game.

Wherever this degeneration has occurred, the proceedings are ominously similar. A decreed number of books is assigned to be read during the course of the school year, at a rate of approximately one each month, the ingenuous premise apparently being that the student will develop in direct proportion to the extent of his exposure

rather than to the depth of his perception. But such an intellectual osmosis is wrongly assumed. The experience of reading cannot be fairly divorced from all other types and must therefore be measured, as Thomas Hardy suggests in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, not according to duration but to intensity. On the contrary, long lists of books for "outside reading" are being published by English departments with increasing frequency and with the strong implication that verbal deficiencies may actually be overwhelmed. Programs that attempt to furnish "reading backgrounds" in this way all too often yield a product which, like the impressive scenery of a vaudeville stage, is colorful and wide, yet deceptively impermanent and very flat.

It does not seem inconceivable that this dedication to quantity is a direct offshoot of the popular survey method of teaching literature. One anthology, now widely used in junior and senior classes, offers as the scope of its survey the entire range of significant English writers, from the unknown authors of the Anglo-Saxon period to James M. Barrie, from Sir Walter Raleigh to Dylan Thomas. Included are selections from the work of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Defoe, Goldsmith, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Dickens, Stevenson, Hardy, Kipling, Yeats, Shaw and Eliot, to name less than a third of the total numbers of authors represented. In something under eight hundred pages of actual text, the student is supposedly "familiarized" with upwards of ninety English writers. Obviously a syllabus of this kind is predicated on a fervent belief in the effectiveness of saturation and on the imposing prospect of having "covered" ninety-nine authors and twelve centuries by June. It is my contention here that the results, even for the superior students, are not what they are intended to be. Chronology alone falls far short of holding this massive panorama intact. The student who succeeds has at best mastered the contents of an interminable list in which the distinct impression is given that Edmund Spenser's contribution to English literature might be perceptively equated with that of Thomas Hood's; indeed the enormity of oversimplification proves disastrous, as one such misleading omission follows another. The student for whom this express journey through time demands the very maximum effort is left amid an even greater confusion of amphorous, half-told tales punctuated by terms like "metaphysical" and "romantic," the true meanings of which lie

hopelessly twisted into catch phrases and bland summations.

The primary failing of this approach to literature, aside from its bold presumption, is its obvious superficiality, a characteristic young people of today seem to detect almost intuitively. But if they are frequently victims of the superficial, they are quite often its masters, and nowhere is this mastery more systematically demonstrated than in the composition of the high school book report.

The requirements have become cadaverously standard: something about the author; a brief summary of the plot; qualities possessed by the main character; the function of the minor characters; the author's message, if any; and finally, a personal opinion from the reviewer. Perhaps the most bewildering requisite of all is that which asks the student to comment on the "literary significance" of the book he has read, a formidable charge by any standard. Last words from the well-intentioned instructor, to the effect that the actual writing should be original, nail the lid tightly shut on the coffin of the report and send the student down a restrictive path to plagiarism. The lines are clearly drawn, and for the properly initiated high school senior the game is not difficult to play.

When the impossible is insisted upon, the safest course is to offer a reasonable imitation. Faced with this reality, the student quickly finds "research" and "paraphrase" his most reliable friends. Yet discovering something well said that is directly applicable to one's report and at the same time being compelled by the very nature of the situation to distort the language into that of a fledgling author simply goes against human nature. The result, in most cases, is a sincere preference for the original. Thus, a student of mine, whose work in composition constitutes his greatest academic deficiency, makes the following observation of *The Scarlet Letter*:

> The plot unfolds as naturally and with as little apparent effort as the petals of a flower.

And later on in the same report:

> Pearl, the child of passion, flutters across the dark pages of the book like a brilliant, exotic bird across a sullen sky.

I submit that this is far from an isolated example and that the problem, now acute at the secondary level, has already spread to the

colleges. Too many students have found their writing ability crippled by this unintentionally compelled reliance on sources other than their own creativeness. The result is a struggle from which no victor can emerge, certainly not the student, for at best he succeeds in being only clever. And more English teachers than ever before have assumed perforce the unbecoming roles of sleuth and magistrate, tracking down suspect phrases and passing sentence with a grade.

As is so often true, pat solutions seem merely to substitute one difficulty for another equally unacceptable. I myself, for example, am reasonably convinced that a sound familiarity with the literature of the past is essential to any real understanding of contemporary writing; yet it is undeniable folly to hope the "super survey" method will serve this purpose. An English teacher who awakens one morning to the realization that his eleventh grade pupils, unless they are exposed to the important writers of America during their high school years, may never again encounter the opportunity, should be forgiven for attempting to fill the void in any way he can. He knows that in college one may frequently skirt American literature with comparative ease, and to those of us in the field the prospect of graduating students who of Melville know only the words "Moby Dick" is more than a little horrifying. Yet this attitude would appear as much the result of professional inbreeding as of cultural necessity. Perhaps it is past time to revaluate the worth of the articulate individual *per se* and to sacrifice, when years allow no other course, some of the shallow bulk of high school literature to this more realistic end.

Imaginative teachers, themselves proficient writers and critics of writing, are essential if the current trend is to be reversed, or at least slowed to a workable pace. The book report itself must be made an experience in which the student participates creatively and in which his own facility for self-expression is permitted to develop amid an atmosphere of greater mobility, with less concern for the actual number of books "reported on" or for strict adherence to some petrifying format. If original composition is expected, it has to be first encouraged and then accepted in terms of the requirements of the course, requirements that not infrequently veil in numbers a sparsity of perceptive intellects. As long as a school measures this important phase of the English program by a standard of "how much" rather than by "how genuine," it must continue to look for-

ward to the monthly submission of miniature masterpieces of deception and patchwork writing neatly labeled book reports.

In several highly competitive schools, where the stereotype book report no longer exists, creative administrators have willingly traded "quantity" for "perception" in the English curriculum, tempering their enthusiasm for thoughtful and original student writing with an insistence on just enough chronological survey to dispel any such serious misbelief as that Wordsworth and Milton were contemporaries. In an attempt to offset the influence of those anthologists who, as one headmaster recently put it, would reduce civilization to outline form, "depth" studies have been introduced that involve the student with the work of a particular writer well beyond the point of misleading generalization. The result has been the stimulation both of original thought and original writing; superficial interest vanishes with the superficial curriculum. Certainly students at whatever level of academic proficiency might benefit from this kind of intellectual experience.

That literature is meant for rapid consumption and that education is itself a phenomenon measured in terms of accumulated facts may well be inherent by-products of an age of technology and speed. But we are rushing past sincerity and, in the battle of the book reports, jeopardizing the very heart of honesty in our schools.