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ABSTRACT

There are many critical problems that are influencing the status of literature and the teaching of literature in the United States today, according to this paper. Some of the problems cited are the poor quality of recent best selling books; the smaller number of people who read books compared to the number of people who read magazines and newspapers, the current vogue of contemporary literature courses and the unpopularity of traditional literature classes in colleges, a trend to basic skills courses away from literature electives and an omission of literature in competency tests in high schools, the higher costs of paperbacks used to supplement the hardback anthologies that are so susceptible to the censor's influence, new copyright laws that restrict supplementing the hardback anthologies with teachers' favorite materials, and the relative paucity of money recently allocated to library services. The important humanizing factors involved in experiencing literature are noted and an appeal is made to teachers to see that literature not only endures but flourishes in human lives. (HKM)

# LITERATURE IN CRISIS

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Those attuned to publishers' annual reports to stockholders, to bottom-line figures (where the buck really stops these days), might sense media hype in my title. No one can deny that books are presently selling well. In its issue of February 1, 1980, Publishers Weekly reported that expenditures on books by individuals and institutions in the United States increased by 14.1 percent in 1978, to $6.5 billion, a rate of increase identical to that posted in 1977, when expenditures totaled $5.7 billion. The Census of Retailing, U.S. Bureau of the Census, found that bookstore sales for the first nine months of 1979 were 13 percent ahead of those for the same period in 1978. The Book Industry Study Group, supported by major publishers and others concerned with what we read, forecasts a 25 percent increase in book purchases in the next three years, from $7.2 billion in 1979 to $11.2 billion in 1983.

Rosy figures, indeed.

But books are not synonymous with literature. When one examines what books are selling, figures quickly lose their roseate luster and take on a slightly tawdry sheen. In The New York Times Book Review, December 30, 1979, Roy Walters announced that when hardback and paperback sales were combined, the five best sellers for fiction in the 1970's were, in order, The Godfather, The Exorcist, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Love Story, and Jaws. The five best sellers for nonfiction were initially reported to be The Late Great Planet Earth, Chariot of the Gods, Your Erroneous Zones, The Joy of Sex, and Future Shock. The list was revised on February 3, 1980, however, when combined sales showed that The Sensuous Woman had earned the right to displace The Godfather as the decade's top best seller, with Helter Skelter moving into third place.

As discouraging as that indicator of Americans' literary judgments may be, more discouraging still is the reported percentage of adults who read books of any type. Between May and June of 1978, the research firm of Yankelovich,

Skelly and White conducted "The Consumer Study on Reading and Book Purchasing." Financed by the Book Industry Study Group, the study involved 1450 one-hour interviews of "a representative sample of the general United States Public" age 16 and over in 165 cities. Interviewers found that non-readers, defined in the study as those who had not read books, magazines, or newspapers in the past six months, constituted 6 percent of the total population. Non-book readers, those who had read newspapers and/or magazines but had not read a book in the past six months, totaled 39 percent of the population. Of that group, 68 percent had not read a book in five or more years. Of the remaining 55 percent who had read one or more books in the preceding six months, 24 percent had read only one to three books. One clear finding of the study, according to Susan Wagner of Publishers Weekly (November 6, 1978), was "that if people do not acquire the bookreading habit by the time they graduate from high school, they never will."

Further evidence of Americans' indifference to, if not antipathy toward, print culture can be found in the seventh Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Public Education, conducted in 1975. Of the 1,558 adults polled, 96 percent thought it "very important" that students be able to read well enough to follow an instruction manual; 92 percent thought it "very important" that students be able to write a letter of application using correct grammar and correct spelling; but only 33 percent thought it "very important" that students know something about the history of mankind and the great leaders in art and literature.

Other polls reveal Americans' consistent preference for viewing over reading. When pitted against television, even newspapers and magazines fare poorly. During the past decade the Roper Organization has annually found that the majority of adults polled cite television rather than newspapers or periodicals as their primary source of news. When asked which source they find most credible--magazaines, newspapers, or television--they choose television by margins as wide as 2.5 to 1 over newspapers and 5.5 to 1 over magazines.

Teachers of English might feel more sanguine about the future of literature if students currently enrolled in higher education were flocking to courses in liberal arts. But they appear to be headed in other directions, blown by the economy toward health and medicine, business and commerce, computer sciences and engineering--fields far more attuned to the job market than are literature, history, or foreign languages. Of the one million high-school seniors who took the Scholastic Aptitude Test in 1979, only 12.7 percent reported on the accompanying Student Descriptive Questionnaire an intention to major in the arts and humanities, with only 1.6 percent choosing English/Literature as their intended field of study, a percentage identical to that which chose English/Literature in 1978.

From 1969 to 1979 departments of English across the nation suffered a sharp reduction in undergraduate majors, a decline varying from 30 percent to 60 percent, depending upon the institution: A typical pattern is that found at the University of Texas at Austin, where I now profess. There the number of undergraduate English majors declined 54 percent during the decade, from 987 in 1969-70 to 450 in 1979-80.

To maintain their staffing, departments have been generating courses at a rapid pace, courses intended to attract "a new clientele," those uncommitted to such traditional offerings as Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare. Exemplary of non-traditional offerings, in range if not content, are those listed this spring at my institution: Detective Fiction; The Female Experience; Film as Fiction; Play and Movie; Science Fiction; Folk Culture and Public Policy; The American Dream; Western Movies, Western Literature; Italian Cinema; The Slavic Image in English Letters; Persian Mystic Literature in Translation; Arabic Literature in Translation; African Literature; Teaching English Literature and Language Overseas; Contemporary American Popular Culture; Man and Religion; American Humor; Eros and Civilization; Popular Literature and Film; and Topics in Country Music. In addition, one can find a number of courses in Chicano, Black, Native-American,

and Asian-American literatures.

Having long ago learned that the word is not the thing, I refuse to decry any course by its title or to attribute to the potpourri of offerings evidence that scholarly standards--those against which I was measured in my youth--are in precipitous decline. Beyond recognizing the realities of a market-place economy in higher education, one in which professors who do not have students lose jobs, I infer from the apparent mélange of literature courses that we are indeed a pluralistic society with diverse literatures and diverse tastes; that we live on a globe that, as a consequence of technological revolutions in transportation and communication, has been conceptually shrinking for decades; that given the instantaneity with which satellite television deposits the world in our parlors and the rapidity with which major foreign authors are being translated, stress upon English and American literatures is abating as greater emphasis is being granted the varied literatures of the planet. Although diversity often has the guise of chaos, I feel confident that even in a buyer's market, literature of quality will continue to find readers in academe.

I am less sure, however, about the health of literature in the schools.

Because of reactionary curricular emphases imposed by the Back-to-Basics movement, schools can no longer make available the rich array of elective courses they once offered. Even if the times were less hostile to pedagogical innovations, escalating prices for paperback books would make impossible the maintenance of such courses. During the past five years, paperback books have become dramatically more expensive, in part because of higher production costs, in part because of multi-million-dollar contracts for reprint rights negotiated between trade publishers and paperback houses.

In 1975 Bantam paid $1,850,000 for Ragtime, while Avon acquired Final Days for $1,500,000; in 1976 Avon purchased The Thorn Birds for $1,900,000; in 1978 New American Library bought Fools Die, along with reprint rights to The Godfather,

for $2,550,000; in the same year Fawcett paid $2,250,000 for a book on astrology, Linda Goodman's Love Signs; in 1979 Bantam bid $3.2 million for reprint rights to Judith Krantz's second novel, Princess Daisy. These staggering sums, the huge publicity budgets given high-contract paperbacks, and the lavish displays accorded them in bookstores displace money and space that more deserving works might have received.

On this point, Natalie Gittelson commented as follows in an article titled "The Packaging of Judy Krantz," The New York Times Magazine, March 2, 1980:

> Of course, the frankly commercial book--call it kitch, pulp, pop, or shlock--has always been with us, as has the appetite for it. But only recently has it been seen as a threat to literary standards and to the whole economy of publishing. "The 'Princess Daisy' syndrome is bad for publishers and bad for writers; bad for morale in the whole publishing environment," said Roger W. Straus, Jr., president of small, elite Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Particularly distressing to those who buy paperbacks of literary quality is that publishers, in order to hedge their bets, have raised prices for their entire lines to subsidize the high-contract books: one does not pay $8.50 for the paperback reprint of The Thorn Birds; one pays $2.75, what one is asked to pay for almost every other of Avon's wares. If a big-money book dies on the shelves, the more humble offerings underwrite funereal expenses.

As the use of paperbacks diminishes in the schools, the use of hardback anthologies returns to favor: not only are anthologies durable and reasonably inexpensive, they are one more ostensible manifestation of a tradition to which taxpayers wish the schools to return. But the tradition of which they are increasingly symbolic is one that bears little relationship to the world, either as it once existed or as it now exists. Since the 1974 uprising in Kanawaha County, West Virginia, over textbooks that were allegedly profane and un-American, anthologies of literature have been repeatedly subjected to concerted censorious attacks, with the understandable if not always admirable consequence that most educational publishers have directed their editors to avoid both traditional and

contemporary materials potentially controversial because of either language or subject matter.

When I first arrived in Texas, August, 1978, I sat through state textbook-adoption hearings for three days and listened as one censor after another--all of them white and female, most middle-aged, all well-coiffured--attacked selection upon selection. Since a series of anthologies bearing my name was being considered for adoption, I had more than passing interest in the proceedings. But financial considerations aside, I am glad I went and recommend the experience to others, for the hearings illuminate the ways of the contemporary censor.

I heard one woman, a statistician, argue that the four giants of American literature are Holmes, Whittier, Lowell, and Longfellow and that they are inadequately represented in the anthologies. The same woman argued that our literary heritage is constituted of those works popular during the time they were written: because this is so, she reasoned, and because the bulk of Emily Dickinson's poems were published posthumously, they obviously could not have been popular in the time they were written and should therefore be struck from the anthologies. (By this criterion of contemporary folk popularity, teachers should now be conducting classroom exigeses of The Exorcist, Jaws, and The Sensuous Woman.) About "A Modest Proposal," the woman commented, "Raise them to be eaten. That's cannibalism. No way for it to be anything else. Publishers can say 'satire' all they want to but it is still cannibalism." (A person sitting through the hearings could not fail to observe that irony, as in times past, consistently escapes the censorious, who take the word literally and the world grimly.)

Mrs. Norma Gabler of Longview, Texas, was in attendance, but did not say much. She and her husband, Mel, run a cottage industry that screens "improper" textbooks. They like to put their protests in writing. Then they can send the protests to supporters across the United States. Then the supporters can go to school-board meetings and protest. Norma and Mel are famous. They have been

interviewed by Sixty Minutes. They have appeared on Good-Morning America and The Donahue Show. They have been written about in Time, The American School Board Journal, and James Kilpatrick's syndicated column. They travel a lot. Norma has been in Canada, and Australia, and New Zealand. She has also been in Kanawaha County. "Improper" books seem to be just everywhere. Norma and Mel wrote that they did not like "Twelve Angry Men." It contains death and violence. "An Enemy of the People" has naughty words--lots of hells and damns. The words should be deleted. "The Interlopers" contains violence and hatred. Besides it has no literary value. "The Rocking Horse Winner" is an attack on the family. It is too depressing. "Footfalls" ends with the murderer going unpunished. It thereby justifies murder. "The Monkey's Paw" emphasizes the supernatural. It is totally unsuitable for literature. "The Lottery" is too violent. It is totally unsuitable for classroom discussion.

The litany could continue, but why bother. Although the State Board of Education in Texas eventally chose to delete only (only?) "The Lottery" from all anthologies adopted in the state, the Gablers and their followers have profoundly influenced what publishers are now willing to include in textbooks. Perhaps more serious, Norma and Mel have had "a chilling effect" on classrooms across the nation, having successfully created by their attacks an atmosphere in which many English teachers, fearful of possible censorial repercussions, will teach nothing but "sanitized" literature. Unfortunately, censorship begets censors.

The irony, of course, is that preadolescents and adolescents have ready access to books, periodicals, films, recordings, and television shows far more violent, salacious, and morally questionable than anything ever taught by elementary and secondary teachers, even in the pre-Gabler days when among the putative purposes of textbooks were those of introducing innocent teenagers to profanity and initiating them vicariously into the rites of sadism and sex. Listen carefully, for example, to the lyrics of such songs as "Love to Love You, Baby";

"Do It to Me One More Time"; "If You Think I'm Sexy"; "Hot Stuff" and "Push, Push in the Bush." View critically "Saturday Night Live," "Soap," "Dallas," and "Charlie's Angels." Take your offspring, as mine badgered me into doing, to such preadolescent cult films as "Saturday Night Fever," "Grease," and "Animal House."

In "Religion and Literature," written close to fifty years ago, T.S. Eliot made the following observation, one as pertinent to popular recordings, films, and television shows as it is to popular literature:

> ...I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for "amusement," or "purely for pleasure," that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us. It is the literature which we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us. Hence it is that the influence of popular novelists, and of popular plays of contemporary life, requires to be scrutinized most closely....

Yet the artifacts of our popular culture that most need to be critically examined for the values they communicate go unattended in the classroom, while "The Lottery" is purged for its violence.

Able teachers have long been accustomed to stepping nimbly outside the literary and pedagogical confines that anthologies impose. They have done so by dittoing classroom sets of literary materials drawn from a myriad of sources. But the time of free-wheeling use of copyrighted works has ended, and teachers are now legally hobbled, or eventually will be, by the General Revision of the Copyright Law, which became effective on January 1, 1978. Under provisions of "fair use," a teacher can make multiple copies (not to exceed more than one copy per pupil in a course) of the following: a complete poem if less than 250 words and if printed on not more than two pages, or an excerpt of not more than 250 words from a longer poem; either a complete article, story or essay of less than 2,500 words or an excerpt from any prose work of not more than 1,000 words or 10 percent of the work, whichever is less. If copyright permission to duplicate the materials

has not been sought in advance, the teacher must be prepared to swear that so close in time were the inspiration and decision to use the work and the moment of its use for maximum teaching effectiveness that it would have been unreasonable to expect a timely reply to a request for permission. (One who has not sought a copyright permission, who is familiar with the law, and who stores materials to be used from one year to the next is patently in violation and is subject to a fine of not more than $10,000 per offense. If the violation is extraordinary, statutory damages can be increased to $50,000.)

Not more than one short poem, article, story, essay or two excerpts may be copied from the same author, nor more than three from the same collective work or periodical volume, during one class term. Nor may there be more than nine instances of "spontaneous" multiple copying for the same course during a class term. Finally, use of the copied material is restricted to only one course in the school in which the copies are made. (For further information, see The New Copyright Law: Questions Teachers and Librarians Ask, copyrighted by the National Education Association, 1977, and distributed by, among others, the National Council of Teachers of English.)

To my knowledge, publishers have not yet sought litigation against any teacher. Nevertheless, they are becoming increasingly impatient with violators and stand ready to sue. At the 47th annual meeting of the Book Manufacturers' Institute, held in October, 1979, the president of the Association of American Publishers (AAP), Townsend Hoopes

> ...urged constant vigilance by publishers in matters touching on copyright law. While acknowledging their budget problems, he was specifically critical of the educational and library communities regarding photocopies. Test cases, he asserted, will be carried into the courts. "Publishers," Hoopes said, "must fight or lose their rights by default." (Publishers Weekly, January 11, 1980)

On February 10, 1980, Tom Ferrell and Margot Slade reported in The New York Times that seven publishers, alleging violation of copyright, had filed suit in

federal court in New Haven against the Gnomon Corporation of Cambridge, Mass. Gnomon, which owns photocopying stores near universities in Cambridge; New Haven; Ithaca, N.Y.; Amherst, Mass.; and University Park, Pa., produces multiple copies of materials submitted by professors for use in their courses. Although counsel for Gnomon said the firm was doing nothing to violate copyright, Henry Kaufman, vice president and general counsel of AAP, said investigators were able to walk into Gnomon and buy 9,000 pages of copyrighted materials from 300 books by 100 publishers.

One can anticipate that unless the number of copyright violations soon abates, suits against commercial outlets will eventually be followed by suits against teachers responsible, either directly or indirectly, for repeated transgressions. When I entered the profession, good teachers were characterized as those having ditto fluid running through their veins. If so, given the conservative temper of the times and the righteous temper of publishers, good teachers, as well as their literature courses, are in imminent danger of anemia.

A further index of the present critical status of literature in the schools has been the relative paucity of federal monies allocated in recent years to library services. Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1979, compiled by U.S. Bureau of the Census, shows educational funds for library services to have been $250 million in 1976; $211 million in 1977; $235 in 1978; and an estimated $255 in 1979--a consistent and sharp decline in funding. When one adjusts for an economy inflated approximately 30 percent from 1976-79, the apparent increase of $5 million in funding for 1979 over that for 1976 is seen to be a loss of $70 million. Exacerbating the problem of inadequate federal funding for school libraries has been inadequate funding of public libraries. Budget-conscious city and state governments have been slashing library services, which, unlike most other taxpayer-supported programs, have very low visibility.

In its single largest monetary cut for FY 80, the Austin (Tx.) City Council eliminated $400,000 from the library budget, with the consequence that branch libraries are no longer open in the mornings and special staffing for library offerings to children and young adults has been ended. Following the passage in California of Proposition 13, county libraries were most adversely affected among institutions supported by property taxes. In an article titled "Trouble in the Stacks," Time reported on November 26, 1979, that 22 percent of California's 3,857 county libraries have been closed and that

> ...in the past year several thousand library staffers have been sent packing. In Hartford, Conn., funds are so short that since 1968 the nine-branch public library has not been able to count and check the half-million books that are supposed to be in its collection. In Fitchburg, Mass., library officials believe they could halt the loss of $8,000 worth of unreturned and stolen books each year by installing a $20,000 electronic detection system. The system would thus earn back its cost in fewer than three years, but the librarians have not been able to wangle the money from the city.
>
> The current crisis is not caused by reader neglect, but is simply a matter of money...Delegates [at the first White House Conference on Library and Information Services] were united in a call to reapportion library funding from towns and cities to the federal government, which now pays only 5 percent of national library costs.

Finally, I believe the competency-testing movement is having an irrefutably deleterious effect upon literature programs in the schools. By ignoring literature, competency tests implicitly communicate to the public that literature, rather than being basic to the curriculum and to human life, is a pedagogical and aesthetic frill. Proponents of the tests are wrong of course. To be adequately realized, human life must be concerned with more than the ability to follow recipes, compute income tax, and fill in employment forms. To enhance the lives of those in their charge, schools must continue to assume as one of their primary responsibilities that of cultivating, nurturing, and refining students' imaginations. While education of the imagination is a goal difficult to achieve, while its processes do not lend themselves readily to computer-scored assessment,

the goal is nonetheless worthy, nonetheless vital to democratic freedom and, ultimately, to human survival.

For teachers of English I need not dwell upon the multiple powers of literature to enrich individuals' existence, powers that enable them to enter the lives of persons different from themselves--different in age, different in sex, different in race, different in acculturation; powers that can transport them across barriers of time and space--into times past, present and future, and into lands real and imaginary; powers that can permit them to compare their attitudes, values, and experiences with the attitudes, values, and experiences of others and, by means of that process, to confirm both their individuality and their shared humanity; powers that can lead them to appreciate the ways by which human language, as employed by a literary artist, can give form to seeming chaos, meaning to seeming insignificance, beauty to seeming banality.

These are no mean powers, as censors know, for accumulatively they can alter as well as reflect a nation's values. And as much as I might disagree with the Gablers of the world, I find myself allied with them against those who, in disregarding literature, covertly suggest that it is an impotent force in the curriculum. As David Reisman observed in an article written decades ago, books can be gunpowder of the mind. I cannot help believing that any definition that fails to recognize the centrality of literature to what is basic in English studies is perforce sterile, simple-minded, and culturally debasing.

Over its long and rich history, literature has survived financial depressions, uncaring and punitive teachers, passing fashions in literary criticism, and periods of censorship and of public indifference. I do not doubt for an instant, as critical as its health may now seem, that literature in the United States will survive the present. Always there will be some individuals who, for any variety of reasons, will be driven to spin artistic tales; always there will be some individuals who, for any variety of reasons, will be driven

to hear or to read those tales. Our job then is to see not that literature endures but that literature flourishes. To that end, singly and collectively, we must continue to resist those who would dismiss its importance as well as those who would use their narrow values to calibrate its range and depth. As yea sayers, we must continue to teach literature passionately, sensitively, critically, and above all, joyfully, assured that if we successfully communicate to this generation of students the multiplicity of values that initially attracted us to literature and led us in time to its teaching, we will have secured the foundation for the vigorous growth of future appreciative audiences.