

IN AN unsettled world, our schools and colleges are confronted with the demand that they prepare the student directly for living. we, too, play a special role, since the literary materials with which we deal are a potent means of forming the student's images of the world in which he lives, a potent means of giving sharpened insight into human nature and conduct. All this is obvious, the English teacher may remark. We deal inevitably with the complexities of human relationships in our teaching. But the teacher will not so readily admit that, in the process of elucidating book or poem or play, he is, with equal inevitability, taking some sort of attitude toward the human relations and human problems presented. Yet, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, the teacher of literature is helping to inculcate particular views of human nature, particular ethical or social philosophies. It will be objected that the inculcation of any definite psychological theories or ethical codes is entirely alien to the English teacher.

Our aim, it will be claimed, is to THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE 9 | 10 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION help our students understand what they read, to help them develop some critical discrimination, to acquaint them with the history of literature, and to give them some insight into literary forms. Surely, this seems to have nothing to do with teaching them specific psychological or sociological theories. The answer is that when we most sincerely seek to fulfill these primary aims, we find ourselves inevitably dealing with materials that at least imply specific psychological theories and moral and social attitudes. As soon as we recall the very obvious fact that literature involves the whole range of human concerns, we are reminded that it is impossible to deal with literature without assuming some attitude toward these human materials. Moreover, because our implied moral attitudes, our assumptions, our unvoiced systems of social values, are reinforced by all the electric intensity and persuasiveness of art, we should bring them out into the open for careful scrutiny. We English Teachers will be extremely scrupulous concerning the scholarly accuracy and balance of our statements about literary history, or the soundness of the standards of literary excellence we inculcate. Our training in normal school, college, and graduate school has been mainly directed toward developing competence along these lines. But how often do we stop to scrutinize the scholarly accuracy or scientific basis of the views concerning human personality and society that insinuate themselves into our work? How often have we consciously and critically worked out the ethical criteria that are implied by the judgments passed on literature, and incidentally, on life? How often, even, are we aware of these ever present, implied generalizations concerning man and society? While we have lavished thought and attention on the more historic aspects of our work, we have taken these other things for granted and have accepted them as a by-product that requires no special thought or preparation. What, then, are some of the ways in which our teaching does impinge on problems that we usually associate with the concerns, for example, of the psychologist or sociologist? A review of the accepted practice in literature classes in school and in college--and, indeed, of much literary criticism as well--would reveal an amazing amount of attention given to topics which could be classified under the heading of psychological theorizing. Since the vivid creation of living characters makes up so large a part of the novelist's, the dramatist's, the biographer's art, it is obvious that an understanding of their work implies an attempt to understand completely the characters they present. How can we read Hamlet, The Return of the Native, or Pride and Prejudice, without such a preoccupation with the

personalities whose lives they help us to share? The student, therefore, is often asked to define the nature of the particular characters in the work that he has been reading. He is encouraged, too, to see some causal relationship between motive and action: To what influences did Macbeth respond? What were the { 12 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION Pauses of his immediate success and final failure? What can explain Lady Macbeth's early determination and / later breakdown? What was the influence of the char- actors upon one another in *Silas Marner*? ^ We do not need the abundant evidence of textbook and teachers' manual to know that such questions will arise. After reading *Hamlet*, the high-school student, as well as the Shakespearean authority, usually turns to theorizing about the rational and irrational elements in human behavior. Conrad's *Lord Jim* flings us into the midst of the problems concerning the effect of a sense of guilt and failure upon personality. The teacher, moreover, is usually careful to lead the student to become sensitive) to the evidence of changes in character that the author /sets forth. This would certainly be true in the case of such works as *Ethan Frome*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Huckle- berry Finn*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, not to mention such perennial texts as the novels of George Eliot or the plays of Shakespeare. *Othello* may serve to illustrate how impossible it is for us to avoid committing ourselves to some definite as- sumptions, once we embark on anything approaching a discussion of characters. The attempt, for instance, to understand *Othello's* rapidly aroused jealousy, to square that with his nature as it is displayed at the opening of the drama, and to see why his jealousy should have led 2 Illustrations will often be drawn from widely used texts. We shall later (Chapters 4, 7) discuss whether, from the point of view of students' needs and interests, the usual reading lists are well chosen. When examples are drawn from the college level, the conclusions based on them apply equally to the high-school level. THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE 13 SO unswervingly to murder, may take a great many forms. Of course, there is a means of evading all these problems by maintaining that the psychological con- sistency of *Othello's* character is merely a theatrical il- lusion. Professor E. E. Stoll contends that any psy- chological interpretation is merely superimposed upon a series of incidents, actions, and speeches that were dic- tated by dramatic tradition and theatrical needs for the sole purpose of creating a convincing and exciting play, without any concern for subtle psychological consist- ency. Even accepting these arguments, we shall still find it necessary to explain why *Othello* gave the im- pression of being a living, integrated personality and not a mere series of theatrical effects. In thinking back over our experience of the tragedy, we shall find that we have fitted what the dramatist offers us into some preconceived notions about human behavior, about the extent of human credulousness or the effects of jealousy. We shall judge whether *Othello* is a credible character in the light of our own assumptions concerning human nature. The fact is that the genius of Shakespeare has suc- ceeded in giving us the illusion that we look on at the fate of living creatures. What they do and what hap- pens to them will make sense for us in terms of our own particular understanding of human motivation. For in- stance, itjwou]d Ji^e _been_ alniQsjLimpq^sibk_ a germ tion ago for a high-school student to have made the re- lationship between *Hamlet* and his mother the core of her interpretation of his actions, as a young girl did re- 14 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION cently. Whether she was aware of it or not, or whether or not she had even heard the name Freud, it is obvious that she had absorbed, somehow, somewhere, certain of the psychoanalytic concepts. Similarly, in an interpreta- tion of *Othello*,

the students may show an extraordinary diversity of theoretical frameworks. One student may emphasize the details offered by the dramatist concerning Desdemona's and Othello's sense of racial difference and may base on that his explanation of Othello's readiness to believe in his wife's infidelity. Another student might make out a case for Othello as an example of a man fundamentally insecure, unsure of his ability to hold Desdemona, and thus ready to believe himself betrayed. Another student may react purely in terms of moral judgment and may see Othello's problem as the struggle between the nobler and the baser elements in his nature, the latter winning momentarily in his condemnation and murder of Desdemona. There will also be the student who will accept the characters' statements concerning the reason for their acts, who will assume that everything they do is consciously willed, and who will pass judgment accordingly. These varied assumptions concerning human nature will be present even if one gives the class the information of which Mr. Stoll reminds us, namely, that in Egyptian dramas, it is often a convention that the husband believes at once in his wife's guilt. The students have experienced the illusion of looking upon life itself and have interpreted it in their own terms. Mr. Stoll will do us the great service of saving us from im-

THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE 15

putting to Shakespeare interpretations which are merely our own. We nevertheless must face the basic assumptions of those interpretations. Even though the teacher, will not feel it necessary to pass judgment on all of the psychological systems implied in the students' reactions, he will at least feel the responsibility to scrutinize the basis for their psychological assumptions'. In most cases, both the teacher and the student are under the illusion that they are merely clarifying or elaborating the author's understanding of his characters and his particular view of human motivation. If it were possible for the teacher not to intrude any direct or indirect comment on these theories, the effect would still be implicitly to approve of the particular conceptions of each author studied. This could result only in the student's being subjected to a series of contradictory or inconsistent notions concerning human behavior. He would be left confused, ready to become a victim of some prejudice, either arrived at capriciously or absorbed from repeatedly heard platitudes. Obviously, we want to help him to understand the author's view of his characters. But the student needs also some means of evaluating it. Complete objectivity on the part of the teacher is, moreover, impossible. It would be very hard not to reveal, in some way or other, something of his own enthusiasms or antipathies--through tone of voice, type of discussion, length of time devoted to the work, or emphasis upon one aspect rather than another. Without realizing it himself, the teacher will undoubtedly convey attitudes of approval or disapproval toward different authors' philosophies of human behavior. One work will be discussed with more zest than another. When the book happens to reinforce the teacher's own view of things, the implications of the author's presentation of character will be emphasized more vigorously. Wuthering Heights, though introduced to the students as a great novel, may, nevertheless, not be presented with the same aura of enthusiasm and approbation as, let us say, Adam Bede. There are even more basic ideas concerning human character that the teacher will convey. In the reading of works of the past--Homer, the Arthurian legends, Beowulf, Elizabethan drama, or Victorian novels--there again arises a very important psychological problem: What are the basic human traits that persist despite social and cultural changes, or to what extent are the resemblances of one age to another,

as well as the differences, due to environmental influences? Indeed, this question of persisting or "universal" human traits is one that arises constantly in discussion of literature. In these societies, human beings act in ways that seem to us "unnatural"; their motivation seems incomprehensible to us—and therefore not quite "human." Our whole tendency, of course, is to equate human nature with the particular motivations, modes of behavior, and types of choice that we have from childhood observed in the society about us. These traits and ways of behavior seem inherent in human nature itself. The inescapable molding influence of the particular environment and culture into which we are born is a concept difficult to master but extremely important as a basis for any intelligent thinking about the problems of human beings in our own society.

THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE 19

Certainly it is a subject that the teacher should have clearly in mind before discussing questions concerning character and motivation, or even before introducing the student to the images of human behavior presented in our own and other literatures. The danger is that we may unquestioningly adopt the general attitudes toward human nature and conduct that permeate the very atmosphere in which we live. Unfortunately, those ideas which are taken most for granted are often the ones that merit the most skeptical scrutiny. The notion that the conscious motives of the individual are the ones that really determine action is, for instance, implied in most casual discussions of behavior. Yet present-day psychology stresses the importance of the unconscious factors motivating behavior. A classroom discussion of essays, letters, journals, autobiographies, as well as all the other forms that deal with individual conduct, automatically creates the necessity for furthering one or the other of these views. What the teacher does not say, or the skepticism that he fails to arouse, will be just as definite a means of reinforcing the usual attitude as if the teacher were consciously or deliberately fostering it. An equally basic approach to human behavior which still dominates the average man's thinking is the old voluntaristic psychology. This assumes that man's conduct is, in largest part, due to his own volition. If man transgresses, it is because he has willed it; the problem of praise and blame is thus a simple one. On the whole, this is the attitude with which the average student will approach literature.

LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION 20

Again, whether he wishes or not, the teacher will, of necessity, either reinforce or counteract these assumptions. He will increase the hold of this view of human nature or replace it with a keener sense of the complexity of human motivation and with a broader understanding of the many environmental, physiological, and involuntary psychological factors that influence behavior. Even those writers who, themselves, may not have consciously held this broader view, have nevertheless often given us descriptions of the significant environmental and physiological factors that may explain their characters' personalities and actions. The teacher either does or does not make the student aware of the possible causal relationships between such things. In either case, he is helping to determine the student's sense of these questions. Despite our desire to leave these issues to the specialists in psychology, we evidently must resign ourselves to the fact that we cannot avoid encroaching upon these extremely important and interesting questions concerning human behavior. The problem lies not in this fact, however, but rather in the fact that the average teacher or college instructor in literature is not necessarily equipped to handle these topics in a scientific spirit. The result tends to be rather that the discussion of characters and motivation follows the superficial lines of ordinary, everyday

conversations about people. The students may thus very easily absorb the idea that on the basis merely of one's own meager experience, one may make valid judgments on human nature and conduct. The instructor must offer, therefore, as a check or corrective framework, some knowledge of the dominant conceptions in contemporary psychology. The teaching of literature involves with equal inevitability the conscious or unconscious indoctrination of ethical attitudes. It is practically impossible to treat in a vital manner any work of fiction, and indeed, one might say, of literature in general, without becoming involved in some problem of ethics and without speaking out of the context of some social philosophy. The ideal personal and social goals that man sets for himself, the values to be sought in any of the innumerable relationships between people, or between the individual and society, in short, a framework of values, is essential to any discussion of human life. In most cases, the concern with specific episodes or characters may veil the fact that these generalized attitudes are being conveyed. Yet any specific discussion necessarily implies the existence of these underlying attitudes. We all are aware of the average student's tendency to pass judgment on the actions of characters encountered in fiction. This tendency is, of course, fostered by the voluntaristic psychology we have just mentioned. At any rate, it is obvious that when the student has been really moved by a work of literature, he will be led to ponder on questions of right or wrong, of admirable or anti-social qualities, of justifiable or unjustifiable actions. Sometimes this tendency is furthered by the type of analysis and discussion of literature carried on in the classroom. What characters do you consider admirable? Why? There is little in that first question to suggest to the student that perhaps we should not judge guilt at all in the situation so poignantly set forth by Hawthorne. The question rules out the point of view that would seek not to pass judgment, but to understand how the whole situation is viewed in the classroom. An authority on English teaching who works with teachers throughout the country reports that "scores of high-school teachers encourage debates on such questions as; 'Was Shylock justified?' Young people themselves are asking everywhere, 'What do the things that we are learning in school and college mean for the life that we are now living, or are going to live?'" We teachers of literature have been too modest concerning our possible contribution to these demands. Our task, we have felt, is to make our students more sensitive to the art of words, to initiate them into the pleasures and the knowledge that our literary heritage offers. What we have to provide has appeared rather a refuge from brute reality. We could, it seemed, leave to others those more mundane preoccupations; we had enough to do in busying ourselves with purely esthetic concerns. When it has been urged that our teaching have some practical relation to the pupil's immediate human concerns, we have pointed to the horrors of the didactic and moralistic approach to literature. With decided justification, we have opposed any tendency to make of literature merely a handmaiden of the social studies or a body of documents illustrating moral points or sociological generalizations. The Victorians demonstrated the sterility of seeking in literature only moral lessons. In reply to the pragmatic critics of education, we have recalled the danger of again subjecting the study of literature to this arid point of view. Those who see literature in such terms, we have insisted, reveal their blindness to the special nature and primary value of the literary experience. Yet when the literary experience is fully understood, it becomes apparent that we teachers of literature have indeed

been somewhat short-sighted. We have not always realized that, willy-nilly, we are constantly affecting the student's sense of human personality and human society. We, more directly than most teachers, are constantly inculcating in the minds of our students general ideas about human nature and conduct, definite moral attitudes, specific psychological and sociological theories, and habitual responses to people and situations. Preoccupied with the major aims of our particular field, we are often not conscious of the fact that we are dealing, in the liveliest terms, with subjects and problems usually thought of as the province of the sociologist, the psychologist, the philosopher or historian. Moreover, we are offering these attitudes and theories in their most easily assimilable form, as they emerge from personal and intimate experience of specific human situations, presented with all the sharpness and intensity of art. The teacher of literature will be the first to admit that he deals inevitably with human relations, with the experiences of human beings in their diverse personal and social relations. The very nature of literature, he will point out, enforces this. For is not the subject-matter of literature everything that man has thought, or felt, or created? The lyric poet utters all that the human heart can feel, from joy in "the cherry hung with snow" to the poignant sense of this world "where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." The joys of adventure, the delight in the beauty of the world about us, the intensities of triumph and defeat, the self-questionings and self-realizations, the pangs of love and hate--indeed, as Henry James has said, "all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision"--these are the province of literature. No matter what the form--poem, novel, drama, biography, essay--literature makes alive and comprehensible to us the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers. And I

6 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE

7 always, in books, we seek some close contact with a mind uttering its sense of life. Always too, in greater or lesser degree, the author has written out of a scheme of values, a sense of a social framework or even, perhaps, of a cosmic pattern. No matter how much else art may offer, no matter how much the writer may be absorbed in solving the technical problems of his craft, in creating with words new forms of esthetic experience, the human element cannot be banished, even if one should wish it. Thus, a writer such as Gertrude who is preoccupied with technical innovation, will have lasting value only as she suggests to other writers new means of conveying emotions and a sense of the flow of life. The most sophisticated reader, extremely sensitive to the subtly articulated qualities of the poem or play or novel, cannot judge its technical worth except as he assimilates, too, the substance which embodies these qualities. Even the literary work that seems most remote, an imagist poem or a whimsical fantasy, reveals new notes in the gamut of human experience or derives its quality of escape from its implicit contrast to real life. Santayana has summed up this basic appeal of literature: The wonder of an artist's performance grows with the range of his penetration, with the instinctive sympathy that makes him, in his mortal isolation, considerate of other men's fate and a great diviner of their secret, so that his work speaks to them kindly, with a deeper assurance than they

1 George Santayana, *Reason in Art* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), pp. 228-229. 8 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION could have spoken with to themselves. And the joy of his great sanity, the power of his adequate vision, is not the less intense because he can lend it to others and has borrowed it from a faithful study of the world. Certainly for the great majority of readers, the human value, the human

experience that literature presents, is primary. For them, the formal elements of the work—style and structure, rhythmic flow—function only as the medium through which is communicated the experience the author wishes to convey. The reader seeks to enter into another's experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible, to find molds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experiences. The teachers of adolescents—in high school or in college—know to what a heightened degree they share this personal or "human" approach to literature. The "literature teacher" may not be primarily concerned with giving scientific information; still it is his responsibility to further the assimilation of ideas and habits of thought that will be conducive to social understanding.

He shares with all other teachers the task of providing the student with the proper equipment for making sound social and*, ethical judgments. Indeed, the English teacher will undoubtedly play an especially important part in this process, since it is very likely that the student's social adjustments will be much more powerfully influenced by what he absorbs through literature than by what he learns in the usual impersonal and theoretical social-science courses. This point, which we shall develop more fully in Chapter 7, makes even more imperative a concern with the phases of literature teaching that we have emphasized in this chapter. The already overburdened literary scholar, aware of the great mass of materials and information that he must absorb, will probably indignantly demand whether he is now being called upon to assimilate also the great body of knowledge accumulated by the social sciences. Certainly, we do not contend that the prospective teacher of English should be given the complete training demanded of the social scientist. This would be impossible in most cases. It does seem imperative, however, that enough of the dead lumber of English training, in normal school, college, and graduate school, be eliminated so that leisure is left for building up a sound acquaintance with at least the general aspects of current scientific thought on psychological and social problems. And practising teachers must feel the necessity for constantly increasing such knowledge. They cannot neglect to establish a rational basis for this inevitable and highly important phase of their influence. It has been our purpose in this chapter to demonstrate how intimately the materials of human relations—psychology, social philosophy, and ethics—enter into the study of literature. But this is not the complete picture. There are still many problems to be clarified. We now must go on to work out the relation between this much neglected aspect of our work and the more widely recognized concerns of English teaching. We have been suggesting considerations that are most often stressed by those who espouse the "social approach" to literature. "These are the significant elements in human personality; these are the kinds of forces that dominate men's lives and lead them to act in certain ways," are the generalizations constantly implied in discussion of specific characters. We cannot emphasize too much that it would be impossible for the literature teacher, even if he desired it, to evade transmitting certain generalized concepts concerning character and the ways in which it is molded. The elements involved in an understanding of human behavior are, therefore, ones that the teachers of literature should investigate thoroughly. Within recent years, in the fields of

psychology, sociology, and anthropology, great strides have been made toward at least a clarification of the fundamental problems. The layman's tendency to speak of "human nature" as though it were constant and unchanging has been searchingly questioned; the plasticity of the human creature has been discovered to be almost endless. In presenting these materials, the teacher consciously, and probably even to a greater extent unconsciously, will be impressing upon the minds of the students various notions concerning historical problems; he will be transmitting various positive or negative assumptions concerning the influence of social and political circumstances upon other phases of man's life. These pictures of life, these images, too, of what is good and beautiful and true, are, moreover, experienced through literature with an immediacy and emotional persuasiveness unequalled by practically any other educational medium. The process of social change (of which literary change is but one aspect), the influence of technological conditions upon the social and intellectual life of a society, the various factors that lead men in one age to be obsessed by very different aspirations from those of another age--such problems are necessarily implied by any survey of the history of literature. How QUICK WE TEACHERS OF LITERATURE WOULD be to condemn the teacher of history or zoology who interlarded his discussions with dogmatic statements about literature, or even worse, instilled into his students' minds fixed attitudes and preconceptions concerning literary experience. How unscholarly we should think the zoology instructor who felt that what he had absorbed about literature from the general atmosphere, from newspapers and magazines, and perhaps from a random course at college, justified his passing on the merits of Milton's poetry or his insinuating that free verse was a ridiculous innovation. He may use the comic incongruities of social conventions and human affectation, as in *The Rivals*, or he may create a somber symphony out of man's inhumanity to man and the inscrutable whims of fate, as in *King Lear*. Just as we have suggested earlier in connection with such works as the *Iliad* or Elizabethan dramas, there may arise the need to make clear THE CHALLENGE OF LITERATURE 25 that in different ages and in different parts of the world man has created extraordinarily dissimilar social, economic, and political structures which pattern the life of the individual in ways very different from our own. Think, for instance, of all of the problems concerning the proper relationship between husband and wife, the desirable patterns of 26 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION family life, the images of the desirable mate, that are necessarily raised by the reading of such works as *The Idylls of the King*, *Dombey and Son*, *A Doll's House*, *Ann Veronica*, and *The Forsyte Saga*. Yet too often we ourselves feel that the social concepts and attitudes absorbed from everyday life, plus a scattered reading on a subject here and there, or a rapid survey of the held in a college 28 LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION course, are ample preparation for our using literature as the springboard for discussions of human nature and. We are forced, of course, to the rejoinder that the very nature of literature necessitates such discussions; we cannot evade these matters by judicious selection. Which suffered ?most