

IS LITERARY CRITICISM A DEFENSIBLE  
COMPONENT OF THE SECONDARY ENGLISH  
CURRICULUM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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IS LITERARY CRITICISM A DEFENSIBLE COMPONENT  
OF THE SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM?

by



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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to determine the place of literary criticism in a secondary English curriculum. The functions of literature in a curriculum are examined and literary criticism is shown to be of vital importance to the satisfactory fulfillment of these functions. Criticism is seen as an essential component in the study and teaching of literature, especially in view of the many and varied forces affecting contemporary society.

On the basis of a comparative analysis of the secondary English curricula of Ontario and Newfoundland and an examination of current literary theory, it would appear obvious that literary criticism demands a sharper focus and a higher priority than it currently receives in the Newfoundland curriculum. Renewed attention to literary criticism in the curriculum should reflect the soundest reasoning found in current literary theory.

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FOR MY MOM AND DAD  
AND  
YOLANDA

### The Reader

Who knows him, he who's let his face descend  
to where a new existency engages,  
only the rapid turn of crowded pages  
will sometimes violently suspend?

Even his mother could not feel quite sure  
it's he, there reading something saturated  
with his own shadow. And, clock-regulated,  
can we know how much ebbed from him before

he labouringly uplooked: thereby upheaving  
all the book's deepness to the light of day,  
with eyes which, now outgiving, not receiving,  
impinged upon a filled environment:  
as quiet children, after lonely play,  
will suddenly perceive the situation;  
his features, though, in full coordination,  
remain forever different.

- Rainer Maria Rilke (1908)

There are three kinds of readers: one who enjoys  
without judgement; a third who judges without  
enjoyment, and, in between, a reader who judges  
while enjoying and enjoys while judging.

- Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe  
(1819)



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Literature in the Curriculum

The principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind.

- Hannah Arendt

Piaget (1970) refers to man's mind as "the as yet unfinished product of continual self-construction" (p. 114). Because the product is forever unfinished and the self-construction of it forever continual, literature is, of necessity, an integral part not only of the school curriculum but also of the lifelong "curriculum" of the education of the individual. Essentially, literature is devoted to improving the quality of the life of the mind and it is this which justifies its place in the school curriculum.

The study of literature is devoted to the nourishment and growth in depth and perception of the imagination. Frye (1964) states that

the fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life, then, is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in (p. 140).

For Frye, the quality of this vision is dependent on the degree to which the imagination is educated through the study of literature. It is literature which offers man a wealth of organized experience and, in so doing, also offers him immense

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and varied possibilities and alternatives in his quest for meaning. Although much of this meaning is gained through analogical thinking, it is not to be lightly dismissed. Hunt (1982), a cognitive scientist, points out that despite the fact that analogical thinking provides only possible conclusions, and possibly wrong conclusions at that, it is still

the most important of our reasoning processes, and is the chief way in which we interpret and deal with the physical world around us (p. 141).

Thus, the immensity, the intensity, and the variety of experiences provided to students through literature is extremely important...

In fact, providing students these experiences may be recognized as being the primary task of literature teaching.

Whitehead (1966) sees this task as

the need to ensure that all children gain the widest possible acquaintance with forms of experience in language which are of finer quality than those to which they are exposed in the home and the street. This experience ... may eventually provide standards of comparison which will enable them at times to see through and reject the cheap, the slipshod and the debilitating (pp. 90-91).

Ultimately, the study of literature frees students so that they may very well rise above the potential superficiality of human existence in modern society. In fact, it is this aspect of choice to which Gadamer (1981) refers when he states that

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knowingly preferring one thing to another and consciously choosing among possible alternatives is the unique and specific characteristic of human being (p. 91).

It is as Luhmann (1970) states:

Man has the capacity to comprehend the world, can see alternatives, possibilities, can realize his own ignorance, and can perceive himself as one who must make decisions (p. 6).

It is this concept of man which makes the study of literature essential and, indeed, causes one to wonder if it were not this realization which gave birth to literature.

The notion of "possibility" is an exciting one in terms of the study of literature. The ability to perceive others and their experiences in literature, to envisage these possibilities, and through them better understand oneself and one's fellow man is essential to inner growth. Jonas (1974) states that

We understand through our possibilities, not necessarily through actual precedents in our experience... On man's nature being "possibility" rather than determinate fact depends our emphatic understanding of even those experiences of other souls - actual or fictitious - which we may never be able to duplicate in ourselves. This is to say that the very use of language for the generation of psychological novelty - an actual enlargement of the soul's estate - depends on this transcending trait of our nature by which we are always more than our present being (p. 274).

Thus, the depth of one's being can be determined by the number of possibilities one can conceptualize. In fact, as Rescher

(1975) points out, "the only possibilities for us are those which can be projected in terms of our conceptual scheme" (p. 214). One of the major functions of literature is to broaden this conceptual scheme.

All this is not meant to detract from the view of literature as aesthetics. In fact, it is the aesthetic experience of literature which is the basis for discrimination among types of experiences. It is here that critical appraisal of literature is so important for it leads to "more discriminating perception" (Reid, 1971, p. 170), and therefore a greater sensation of literature for, as Nuttal (1974) indicates, sensation "is a condition of perception" (p. 290). Nor is it meant to detract from the enjoyment of the study of literature. Wellek and Warren (1977) capture the idea well:

The pleasure of literature ... is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures but is a 'higher pleasure' because pleasure is a higher kind of activity, i.e. non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility -- the seriousness, the instructiveness -- of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e. ... an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception (p. 31).

It is this aesthetic seriousness which is a function of the study of literature which Smith and Smith (1971) refer to as "the inhibiting function of aesthetic education vis-a-vis popular art" (p. 143). This is so because

aesthetic education offers as alternatives examples of better, richer, more worthwhile forms of experience, in the hope that persons will come genuinely to prefer what they have come to know as being better (p. 143).



Viewed from this perspective, the study of literature must be pursued with zest, fervor, and an underlying seriousness of intent and purpose. Literature is life - as it was, as it is, and as it can be. It is the life of the mind and, as a result, is indelibly linked to the life of the total being. Our aim in aesthetic and humanistic education is to create inner freedom and to enrich inner life (Klinger, 1977, p. 325; Hardison, 1972, p. 17). This can only be accomplished through adherence to the goals of literary study:

Literature ... should acquaint the student with objects of aesthetic enjoyment; and excite his enjoyment of them, while at the same time developing a refined and discriminating taste. He should acquire some stirring of creative impulse, and a love of truth and beauty as ends in themselves which transcend the utilities of practical life and the bare requirements of morality (Perry, 1954, p. 417).

No subject in a curriculum can claim any nobler goals.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CRITICISM AND ENGLISH EDUCATION

#### Definition of a Critic

The proliferation of literature devoted to criticism of and in the arts is testimony to the importance of the critic and his criticism. For those whose livelihood is the arts, the critic can spell instant success or disaster. For those who study the arts the critic's role is probably less devastating but certainly as crucial. Not only is the critic's statement an evaluation of the worth of a piece of art, it can also be a vehicle through which insight is gained and further avenues are opened for the exploration and the examination of art.

Despite the usual negative connotations of severity, harshness, and captiousness which follow the critic, his roles are varied and complex. Webster's Third New International

Dictionary defines a critic as

one who expressed a reasoned opinion on any matter (as a work of art or a course of conduct) involving a judgment of its value, truth, or righteousness, an appreciation of its beauty or technique, or an interpretation (p. 358).

The compilers also state that a critic is "one who engaged often professionally in the analysis, artistic evaluation, or appreciation of works of art" (p. 538). From these definitions, one may conclude that a critic can exist in both a nonprofessional role, as in the former definition, and in a professional role, as in the latter.

David Russell (1970) questions the definition of the critic as that of judge or fault-finder. He sees the critic as "one who communicates part of his experience of a work of art and encourages others to react in diverse ways, form their own opinions, and defend their positions" (p. 109).

Conceivable though this role may be, it is difficult to imagine a reaction to art that is not, too, a judgement, however subtle. In fact, the role of judge would appear to be a major preoccupation of the critic.

For I.A. Richards (1924), a father figure in criticism circles, this is most certainly the case. He sees a good critic as one who holds three specific qualifications:

He must be an adept at experiencing, without eccentricities, the state of mind relevant to the work of art he is judging. Secondly, he must be able to distinguish experiences from one another as regards their less superficial features. Thirdly, he must be a sound judge of values (p. 114).

These characteristics allow the critic to act as a mediator between the artist and the public. Underlying this, of course, is the assumption that a mediator is necessary apparently because the artist and the public do not experience and therefore cannot communicate on the same level. Thus, a mediator, and sometimes a translator, is necessary. Murray Schwartz (1978) alludes to this when he defines the critic as "a reader who makes a difference by using himself to represent an other..." (p. 11). In this case the "other" is the author of the text which the critic chooses to criticize.

The difference appears to be in the minds of the audience who are exposed not only to the text but to the critic, as well.

This role, in fact, can make the critic into a socially useful being. The Encyclopedia Britannica states that "a critic is socially useful to the extent that his society wants, and receives from him, a fuller understanding of literature than it could have achieved without him" (p. 1037). This, then, may be considered the public dimension of criticism. The critic judges a piece of art and, by his judgement, calls the attention of the public to the work of art or, in the case of a negative judgement, diverts the public away from it. Either way, he calls attention to a piece of art. Once the attention of the audience is won, the critic may then, in the words of Maxine Greene (1978), guide the audience "on a journey through a work of art, pointing to those aspects of their principles or guiding concepts that make it possible for them to see" (pp. 206-7)?

All of this is not to suggest that the critic has the last word in the evaluation and interpretation of art. It is Greene (1978), as well, who points out that "no critic can ever fully translate a symbolic structure or determine the discoveries an individual will make" (p. 207). Pertinent to a discussion of a critic's view - or of criticism in general - is recognition of the fact that just as criticism has a very public dimension, there is also, ultimately, an intensely private and personal dimension to it, as well. Schwartz (1975) summarizes this point well when he states that "all criticism

of literature originates in our personal experiences of individual works, and all criticism is a transformation of those experiences" (p. 756). More precisely, "criticism is an exercise of private sympathy, discrimination, and moral and cultural reflection" (Encyclopedia Britannica, p. 1041). It is through the public expression of this private encounter that knowledge is gained and agreement reached in the quest for the constructive improvement of man's expression in art.

Steiner (1967) sees the critic as being responsible for developing what he refers to as "humane literacy" (p. 10). Not only does the critic function to help the reader choose what is worthwhile among the immense volumes of literature available, but he must also uphold "special responsibilities toward the art of his own age" and provide some estimable reply to the question, "what is the measure of man this work proposes?" (Steiner, 1967, p. 9). It is imperative then that the critic must censure that which, in art does not allow for the maintenance of man's dignity through his humanity. The critic in this capacity has a responsibility to indicate what and where "art" appears to display a shallow, superficial view of humanity.

#### Criticism and Education

Awesome though he may appear, the critic cannot be viewed as a person whose role is totally divorced from the educational setting of the classroom. Northrop Frye, one of the best known critics of this century, emphasizes the strong



relationship between criticism and teaching. Frye (1964) states that

the great bulk of criticism is teaching, at all levels from kindergarten to graduate school. A small part of it is reviewing, or introducing current literature to its public, and a still smaller, though of course central, part of it is scholarship and research (pp. 127-8).

Frye is not alone in his view of criticism as teaching. Greene (1978) also binds the two nicely when she states:

It is often said that teaching - good teaching - is identical with criticism, especially when it is carried on for the sake of making particular art forms more accessible (p. 206).

To strengthen further the bond, Greene (1978) goes on to assert that the ultimate test of good teaching lies in

whether or not critics (or teachers) can intensify another's appreciation, enrich vision, free him or her to bring a given work into being in his or her inner time... (p. 207).

These assertions coincide well with the established roles of the critic for they allow the critic to be regarded, not as a restricting force but rather as a liberating force, one who "opens more books than [he] closes" (Steiner, 1968, p. 7).

There can be little doubt that schools are more than preoccupied with fostering reading skills and promoting recreational reading. This concern has led some educators to discard as irrelevant any mention of criticism and the curriculum. Criticism and reading, as it were, have been placed on opposing ends of the spectrum. Not only is this an

apparent contradiction, it is also educationally unsound.

Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that

every reader is to some degree an embryonic critic, and every critic one who carries further the inherent activities of the reader... (p. 138).

Thus viewed, the reader and the critic cannot be diametrically opposed. The capacity for the development of the critical skill is inherent in the reader and, therefore, must be fostered in the literature programme. Howards (1969) captures the essence of this when he defines critical reading as

seeing relationships, sensing moods and tone, and being able to bring to bear on all reading situations, verbal and nonverbal, a total awareness of what is occurring (p. 172).

These skills associated with critical reading are essential for instruction in literature and are, therefore, the concern of the teacher of literature. As Simmons, Shafer and West (1976) indicate,

much of the success in the teaching of literature may hinge on teachers' being able and willing to diagnose reading problems, to prepare students for needed instruction, and to execute this instruction (p. 54).

Once the necessary skills are acquired, these authors then claim that "literature teachers should be adept at introducing students to critical reading" (p. 54).

Still others reject the critic and any form of criticism in the classroom because, they argue, criticism destroys spontaneity and prevents the reader from engaging in a fulfilling aesthetic experience. Few would be inclined to

disagree with the notion that aesthetic experience is the primary aim of literature. It is, as Britton (1982) pointed out in a recent interview, "the aesthetic reading of literature which keeps it alive in our society" (p. 23).

Again, it would seem, there is an unnecessary pitting of forces against each other. Though it may be true that criticism can detract from the aesthetic experience of literature, it is not necessarily so that it does or that it will. While admitting that criticism must be placed "... in subservience to the young person's engagement with the material [literature]", Judy (1981) also states that "analysis and criticism are not in opposition to a reader-centered program" (p. 156).

Clearly, any literature program in which literary criticism is not a priority may be seriously challenged to justify its place in a school curriculum. Culler (1975) states that

in the process of literary education criticism is both an end and a means, the natural culmination of study of an author and the instrument of literary training (p. vii).

Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that, in the practical application of this view, it is not necessary to divorce the critic and the reader in the study of literature. Rather,

instead of a contrast or break between the ordinary reader and the knowledgeable critic, we need to stress the basic affinity of all readers of literary works of art (p. 140).

Even so, criticism need not "short-circuit" literary study in the classroom as Britton (1968, p. 6) suggests. Rather, criticism has the potential to help students become more confident, more critical, and more satisfied readers.

Without criticism, an aesthetic experience may never actually occur during the reader's encounter with literature either inside or outside the school classroom.

Criticism in the English curriculum has a crucial role to play, too, in terms of what has become known as popular art or popular culture. Frye (1957) refers to this role of criticism as "transvaluation" or

the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture (p. 348).

Frye (1957) further claims that

one who possesses such a standard of transvaluation is in a state of intellectual freedom. One who does not possess it is a creature of whatever social values get to him first: he has only compulsions of habit, indoctrination, and prejudice (p. 348).

It is such frivolous natures which popular culture is producing in hordes - individuals who lack individuality and who are "the product of an industrial machine which makes baubles to amuse the savages while missionaries steal their souls and merchants steal their money" (Gass, 1970, p. 274).

Surely our educational system must be expected to aid in the development of minds which are able to detect such abuse. Modern society is such that the amusement industry

via various media reaches the individual first. The unequipped individual who has not been taught to interpret, to analyze, to seek meaning, to critically appraise is unarmed on a battlefield where art and popularity wage war and, at present, where the odds for victory are sadly in favor of the latter.



## CHAPTER THREE

### CRITICISM AND THE CURRICULUM

#### History of Criticism in English Curricula

The degree to which criticism should be a part of a secondary English curriculum has long been a contentious issue among teachers and scholars in the subject area. There is no period in the history of the teaching of English during which there existed a consensus on what role, if any, criticism should play in the study of literature at the secondary level.

As early as 1897, the National Conference on Uniform Requirements in English recommended that literature at the high school level should be taught with reference to language, style, structure, and method, and with reference to the place of the work in literary history and the circumstances, both social and personal, under which it was written (in Evans and Walker, 1966, p. 8). This stance may be viewed as a subtle attempt by the Conference to bring high school literature teaching in line with college literature teaching. Such reasoning for the inclusion of criticism in secondary English curricula caused Colby (1906) to state that

the high school should recognize that its primary purpose is to contribute through its course and its instruction to making boys and girls into men and women of generous, intelligent minds and hearts, and capable hands. If this also fits them to take up the work in college, it is well. If not, surely the pertinent question is whether colleges themselves are on the right track (p. 175).

However, this preoccupation with the moral and social worth of literature was not a priority shared by all. In the same year, Bates (1906) claimed that

certainly a pupil who graduates from the high school should have some power of criticizing intelligently any book which comes into his hands, and of forming estimates of diction, general form, and to a less extent even of style (p. 194).

I.A. Richards (1924) saw criticism as being of great importance to the study of literature and the development of intelligent respondents to literature. He claimed that "bad taste and crude responses are ... a root evil from which other defects follow" (p. 62). Thus literature and criticism were to be used to develop good taste and eloquent responses in students in order to satisfy the aims of literature as a subject of study.

During the thirties, both F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson spoke out strongly on the issue of criticism and reading. Leavis (1932) stressed the importance of teaching students at the school level to read critically and discriminately. Wary of the negative influences of the environment, he stated that

... a serious concern for education in reading cannot stop at reading. Practical criticism of literature must be associated with training in awareness of the environment - advertising, the cinema, the press, architecture and so on ... (pp. 48-9).

Thompson (1934) reiterated the claims made by Leavis (1932) when he stated that it is necessary for students "to acquire the equipment, the tools of analysis, for assessing through

the texture of writing the quality of the mind which produced it" (p. 13).

It was also during the thirties that Louise Rosenblatt published Literature as Exploration, a book which was to cause many changes in the attitude of teachers toward criticism in the English curriculum. Rosenblatt (1938) laid the foundations for what has become known as reader-response criticism with her remarks directed at the study of literature in schools. She stated that

there must take place an integration between the framework of interests, ideas, and feelings that the student brings, and the structure of ideas and emotions offered by the text.

This concept offered the potential for those concerned primarily with the interests of the reader and those concerned primarily with the development of critical skills to find grounds for compromise.

The decades following Rosenblatt's book saw an increased emphasis on student response to literature in the curriculum. Teachers and scholars at the Dartmouth Seminar of 1968 almost totally rejected criticism as having any place in the literature curriculum. At this conference, D.W. Harding (1968) stated that

response is a word that reminds the teacher that the experience of art is a thing of our making, an activity in which we are our own interpretative artists. The dryness of schematic analysis of imagery, symbols, myths, structural relations, et al. should be avoided passionately at school and often at college. It is literature, not literary criticism which is the subject (p. 26).

Despite the sentiments of those who attended the Dartmouth Seminar, there were still those who strongly advocated the use of criticism in the study of literature. Lee (1968) stated:

If we are to continue to affect the lives of our students after they leave the classroom, we must place priority on the underlying structure and form of our discipline, rather than on its content (p. 69).

The conflict continued into the seventies, marked by comments such as those made by Mathews (1973) who claimed that for "too long have classroom teachers been thrall to the professional critic" to the point that "...literature itself, deprived of its power of personal infusion, is in danger of being entirely replaced by pop art" (p. 569). Counter to this, Hipple (1973) stated that "teachers of English can eclectically draw upon their [the critics'] efforts to produce exciting literature study in secondary school classrooms" (p. 76).

Although recent developments have not brought English teachers any closer to consensus, there does appear to be a movement toward compromise. Judy and Judy (1979) stated that "a response-centered approach is by no means inconsistent with evaluating literature or with introducing students to 'great' literature" but it is pertinent that any literature study "should center on the reader and his or her responses rather than examination of texts themselves" (p. 135). Hook and Evans (1982) expressed similar sentiments regarding textual analysis:

It [the analytical approach] does have value ... if it is employed occasionally but not constantly, and if the stress is not upon abstruse literary terminology but rather upon broad description of the author's techniques (p. 183).

It would seem obvious that what is evolving is an approach to literature which incorporates reader response and criticism.

One cannot be excluded at the expense of the other when both, of necessity, are essential components of a secondary English curriculum.

#### Criticism in the Secondary Curricula of Ontario and Newfoundland

Surely any component of literary study deemed of such importance must have a well-established, clearly defined position in a secondary English curriculum. Not only must an English curriculum reflect adherence to the development of interpretative, evaluative and critical abilities in students, but this adherence must be clearly visible in its philosophy, aims, objectives, and strategies.

In order for any semblance of unity and coherence to exist in a province-wide or state-wide curriculum, teachers, while not straight-jacketed in terms of personal approach, must be clear as to the underlying philosophy promoted by such a curriculum. Vagueness, generalities, and incomplete outlines of courses can lead to disarray in a curriculum and, ultimately, to a situation in which sight of aims and objectives is quickly lost. The end result is fragmentation, disunity, inconsistency and lack of standards.



Thus, guidance and direction are of utmost importance to teachers who must implement a curriculum. This is especially true in terms of an English curriculum. It has been stated that the humanities are "the least esoteric subjects in the curriculum" (Hardison, 1972, p. 156). It may also be said that literature is the least esoteric of the humanities. This, in itself, has led to much abuse of literature in the name of the study of literature in the classroom. Although much of this abuse may have been inflicted by teachers untrained in the area of literature teaching, those trained to "teach" literature are not blameless. Lack of direction and a poor concept of what it means to approach literature as an area of study in the curriculum has resulted in chaos in many literature classrooms. As a result, students are deprived of the opportunity of attaining basic skills in the pursuit of literary competence.

The most obvious place in which educators may seek preliminary guidance in confronting instructional materials is in curriculum guides designed specifically to aid teachers in the teaching of a given course. Such guides should include a detailed definition of the English programme and an explicit outline of the aims and objectives which the programme is designed to fulfill. As well, suggestions should be made available to teachers which indicate how to approach a given unit of literature study without stifling the responses of students and at the same time, maintaining a critical stance which fosters the pursuit of meaning. Such a philosophy is

subtle and intricate and care must be taken to establish and maintain a balance in methodology.

Of equal importance to methodology is course content. It may be taken for granted that any English curriculum which strives to attain a high level of student response to, critical attention to, appreciation for, and interest in literature will include a variety of the very finest in literature of the past and the present. Any English curriculum containing a limited range of material will allow students a limited exposure to a field in which literature of variety and excellence is in abundance. This type of deprivation cannot be justified in a curriculum, whatever the reasons.

An overview of the Secondary English curriculum guides for the province of Ontario, the largest school system in Canada, and the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is indicative of the importance of literary criticism in the curriculum of each of these provinces.

#### Ontario

Both the curriculum guides for Intermediate English (7-10) and Secondary English (11-13) in Ontario were examined in order to determine the extent to which literary criticism is a component of the Ontario English curriculum.

Intermediate. At the Intermediate level (7-10), the general aims of the integrated curriculum include two of six aims relevant to criticism:

to promote the student's appreciation and enjoyment of literature and language (p. 5).

and

to develop the students' critical skills and help him apply them in responding to material transmitted through the various media (p. 5).

However, in its policy statement, the Ontario Ministry of Education warns that, at the Intermediate level

appreciably more than half of classroom time should be devoted to providing students with opportunities to be actively involved in personal reading and writing, rather than in formal exercises in vacuo or teacher-directed discussions centering on literary criticism (p. 8).

This stance is reflected, as well, in the general objectives of the English program where the emphasis is on the development of the basis skills of reading, thinking, listening and viewing which are necessary prerequisites to any work in criticism (pp. 10-13).

In a specific discussion of literature, however, the importance of criticism is clearly identified in the following statement:

... the critical faculty cannot be developed without an examination of various materials, and no one would deny that such development is essential to the personal growth of each student (p. 80).

Further to this, in describing general strategies for teachers at the levels of "organizing and interpreting ideas" in literature and "reading critically and selectively" in literature, ten strategies are listed for the former and nine for the latter (pp. 82-83).

Secondary. At the Secondary level (11-13) of the Ontario English curriculum, the very first line of the rationale for the program states that "it must not be left to chance that secondary school students acquire a deep understanding and appreciation of English language and literature" (p. 4). This belief is reflected through the Ontario curriculum guide for Secondary English. This statement of aims associated with criticism in the curriculum reflect those stated in the Intermediate guide and add the aim "to increase the students' knowledge of literature, both past and present..." (p. 7). As well, a list of objectives refers not only to the enjoyment of literature but also to the appreciation, discrimination, and judgement of literature (p. 9). A list of reference material for the Secondary English classroom also includes a title on the history of literary criticism.

As would be expected, the major emphasis on literary criticism occurs in the final year of the Ontario school programme. In this year, a strong emphasis is placed on "sound literary judgement", "discrimination", interpretation, and analysis (pp. 13-14). Suggested lesson plans for all units incorporate literature, language study and writing and are indicative of a formal study of literature.

However, this should not be construed as a total emphasis on literary criticism at the Secondary level. For example, in a section on suggested approaches to Shakespeare, while it is recognized that "some critical study is germane

to the understanding of a Shakespearean play, ..." (p. 40) students must be allowed to experience the dramatic impact of the play, too. Thus, while the importance of criticism is recognized, student response is also given high priority.

#### Newfoundland

The course descriptions/curriculum guides for the Junior High School levels (7-9) and the Senior High School levels (10-12) in Newfoundland and Labrador were examined in order to determine the place assigned to literary criticism in the Newfoundland and Labrador English curriculum.

Junior High School. Although the course descriptions/curriculum guides for the Junior High School do not contain a specific outline of general aims, it is stated that the English programme should provide

opportunities for students through a wide variety of literature, to become familiar with the perceptions of recognized writers, past and present and thus develop a sense of what is worthwhile literature, and a deepening appreciation of their heritage (p. 2).

Nowhere in the course descriptions/curriculum guides is any suggestion made which indicates how teachers are to approach literature in attempting to make the most of these opportunities. What is provided is a list of concepts to be covered in the study of the genres of literature at each level (p. 6).

There does appear to be a subtle shift toward a more formal study of literature at the Grade Nine level of the

Junior High School English programme (pp. 6-8). As well, the Grade Nine course description/curriculum guide lists "criticizing" (p. 2) as an appropriate thinking skill for development at this level and "interpretative skills" (p. 3) as appropriate to developmental reading at this level.

Senior High School. At the Senior High School levels (10-12) in Newfoundland and Labrador, language and literature are offered as separate courses of study. A recent reorganization of the Senior High School curriculum, begun in 1981, resulted in the development of six literature courses: two courses in Thematic Literature, two courses in Literary Heritage and one course each in Canadian Literature and Folk Literature. At present, course descriptions/curriculum guides are available in three of these: Thematic Literature 1200 and Thematic Literature 3201 and Literary Heritage 2201. Examination of those available at this time reveals the place of criticism in the Senior High School English Curriculum.

In the general objectives for the study of literature listed in the course description/curriculum guide for Thematic Literature 1200, the emphasis is on the response of the student emotionally, reflectively, and creatively to a work of literature (p. 7). Reflective responses include responding to literature

by evaluating critically a work of literature in terms of reflecting upon its language and structure, its relationship to the self, and its relationship to the world (p. 7).

The same objectives are also listed for the other Thematic Literature 3201 and Literary Heritage 2201. These ideas are reiterated in the philosophy of instruction for all three literature courses. However, there are no guidelines given for teacher instruction in this regard and suggested evaluative procedures do not reflect attention to the concept of literary criticism, even in the senior year of English study.

Overall, there appears to be an element of literary criticism in the English curriculum of Newfoundland and Labrador but it lacks clarity, definition and emphasis. The extent to which analysis, interpretation, discrimination, and judgement are included in the study of literature is vague and is, by far, too much in the hands of the individual teacher who, upon reading the course descriptions/curriculum guides, cannot help but conclude that the framework in which he works is a flexible one indeed.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

#### Current Literary Theory

##### Semiology

Literary criticism and the theories upon which it is based have evolved significantly in recent years. As with any new developments in any discipline, new proposals and new theories always instil optimism in scholars and provide promise for unlocking the mysteries of a field of study. Literature affords those who pursue its study many of these "mysteries". Semiotics, or semiology, is the new theory which "promises" to account for many of these mysteries.

Semiotics or semiology (the former is preferred by Americans, the latter by Europeans) has its origin in the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure. In his Course in General Linguistics, first published in 1915, de Saussure proposed that

a science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (p. 16).

Thus was born a new concept in language, one which was not to be developed by de Saussure but would come into its own in the late sixties and seventies largely due to the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes (1968) defines semiology as the study of

any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention, or public entertainment: these constitute, if not language, at least systems of signification (p. 9).

Literature is included in the scope of semiology because literature, by its very nature, is one such system of signs in which codes and conventions are utilized (Todorov, 1975, p. 97). Semiology seeks to establish what these codes and conventions are and, thus, to determine how meaning is conveyed.

Here, the common functions of semiology and criticism appear obvious. Guiraud (1975) states that

the aim of criticism is to liberate the text and to restore its semantic richness by reconstituting the codes and the modes of signification which subtend it (p. 81).

Culler (1981) strongly emphasizes this point in the wake of the strong interpretative tendencies of the New Critics. He claims that

to engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of "King Lear" but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse (p. 5).

Such a criticism focuses not on what meaning is but rather on what meaning can be and what allows various possibilities of meaning to exist.

The enormous challenge which literature offers semiology is clear. Literary semiology must deal with "the

indeterminacy of meaning, which is a central if paradoxical property of semiotic systems" (Culler, 1981, p. 25). This point is also made by Coward and Ellis (1977) when they state that, in literary semiology, meaning "is no longer a matter of a pre-given, arbitrary relation between signifier and signified" (p. 6). The various interpretations and meanings placed on a piece of literature is proof of this statement. What semiology strives to do in this respect is to aim for "a coherence and validity of response" to literature and not "objectivity and truth" (Hawkes, 1977, p. 156).

Thus, literary semiology provides a position of high esteem to the reader and/or critic. Culler (1981, p. 38) refers to the reader as "the repository of the codes which account for the intelligibility of the text". In order for these codes to be identified, the meaning which each reader gathers from a piece of literature is invaluable information in semiology for it is only by determining all possible meanings (an impossible task!) that the codes and conventions of literature may be unveiled. It is an insensitivity to these codes and, thus, to the violations of codes in art which causes Wittig (1976) to claim that

most American literary criticism is in the pre-Saussurian state of recognizing only a multitude of evolutionary differences, of uniquenesses, and has not yet begun to develop a systematic concept of the formal relations among literary works (p. 144).

Recent developments in literary semiology seem to indicate that future literary theory and criticism may make significant

gains in this respect. However, a note of caution may well be in order as indicated by Krieger (1976):

Especially as it seeks to move literary study - via semiotics - toward the social sciences, current theory... seems at times to be using its role to undermine its mistress ... in its recent forms theory leads away from the unique powers of literature as an art, the center of our humanistic domain (p. xii).

Theory is only useful when it serves to bring into focus the reality of that which is the subject of theorizing. The reality of literature is always humanity.

#### Hermeneutics

In his book, Art and Knowledge, Joseph Chiari (1977) states that

a performance or an interpretation is like religious experience, purely subjective, while a work of art is both subjective and objective; it is an objectified subjectivity which becomes the existential basis for any number of subjective interpretations or performances (p. 8).

The premise that literature is subjective experience couched in what may appear to be objective language may be ignored in the study and teaching of literature. As a result, alternate interpretations may possibly be rejected, reflecting an unsound philosophical and theoretical methodology. The fact that alternate interpretations of texts do and will continue to exist or, in the words of Bleicher (1980),

the realization that human expressions contain a meaningful component, which has to be recognized as such by a subject and transposed into his own system of values and meanings. (p. 1)

is the essence of a field of study known as hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, a term originally restricted to interpretation of the Bible (Palmer, 1969, p. 34) is more generally defined as

the art, skill, or theory of interpretation, of understanding the significance of human actions, utterances, products, and institutions (The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, p. 281).

Gadamer (1981) defines hermeneutics as simply, "the theory or art of explication, of interpretation" (p. 88). Bleich (1975) defines "interpretation" as "the response [of the reader] to his reading experience" (p. 754). For Heidegger (1962), interpretation is much more than that. It is "the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding" (p. 189). In both cases, interpretation is viewed as an ontological device, a means of exploring man's being-in-the-world, man's search for meaning.

Viewed in this way, interpretation is an essential element of the study of literature. In fact, Hoy (1978), in discussing poetry, claims that interpretation is inevitable. He states that

interpretation is not merely a possible way of relating to the poem ... it is the necessary way (p. 100).

Further interpretation is as necessary a prerequisite to the possible meanings of a text as understanding is a prerequisite to the interpretation of a text. Iser (1978) claims that "the interpreter's task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one" (p. 22). Iser's claim that a text has more than one meaning and that "the total potential [meaning] cannot be fulfilled in the reading process" is strongly in keeping with hermeneutical theory which posits that interpretation is "only an attempt, plausible and fruitful, but clearly never definitive" to seek absolute meaning (Gadamer, 1981, p. 105).

Whether such a thing as "absolute meaning" exists is extremely doubtful. If, as Scholes and Kellogg (1966) claim, "meaning ... is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the 'real' world, the apprehendable universe" (p. 82), then it must surely be asserted that this relationship is not something already existent but, rather, is constructed by the reader. Iser (1978) captures the inter-relatedness of reader and text, in this sense, when he claims that

as far as literature is concerned, the meaning of the literary work is not the same as the formulated aspects, but can only be built up in the imagination through continual shifting and reciprocal qualifications of those aspects. What the language says is transcended by what it uncovers, and what it uncovers represents its true meaning. Thus the meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together (p. 142).

This "putting together" represents, for the reader, an interpretation of the experience of the text.

All of this, however, does not account for what may be termed the "legitimacy" of various, oft-times opposing, interpretations. It is not determined, as Hirsh (1967) claims, by the validity of one interpretation as opposed to another for this can never be fully determined. Rather, it is as Fish (1978) claims in reference to evidence used to support a given interpretation:

The "facts of the matter" are never simply there waiting to be uncovered by some sufficiently transparent instrument; rather they come to view as a function of categories of understanding which already have a place marked out for them. Since some or other categories of understanding are always operating, there will always be facts, but they will not always be the same ones, and no set of them will have the status that will allow them to be cited as objective and independent proof. This does not mean that a structure of proof cannot be erected, but that its force will be system specific, and that someone who stands outside the system will remain unconvinced because the facts to which the argument refers will not be the facts for him (pp. 172-3).

The facts to which Fish (1978) refers are what Langer (1953) refers to as "poetic facts", facts whose "emotional import is part of their appearance" (p. 223). As such, these facts may and do appear differently to different readers. This encompasses well the concept of the subjectivity of interpretation as well as the concept of the indefinitiveness of interpretation.

However, this should not be seen as a claim to the legitimacy of all interpretations. Any interpretation which



cannot be established as conceptually sound is unacceptable. Thus, not just any reading of a text will do. As Davis (1978) states, "interpretation must be understood as a conceptual rather than an intuitive or merely perceptual affair" (p. 10), an affair in which the ultimate task is the attainment of meaning. In this sense, students of literature must be given conceptual tools which will enable them to approach a text, to see its possibilities and to inquire into its range of meanings. And this is the exact purpose of criticism in the study of literature for, as Langbaum (1977) so aptly states, "literary criticism is the application of concepts to literature" (p. 20) and, as such, is vital to any study of literature. Gadamer (1981) also alludes to this when he states:

To be sure, one has to master the grammatical rules, the stylistic devices, the art of composition upon which the text is based, if one wishes to understand what the author wanted to say in his text; but the main issue in all understanding concerns the meaningful relationship that exists between the statements of the text and our understanding of the reality under discussion (p. 98).

An interpretation which does not enhance this understanding (Fish, 1980, p. 351) or which does not "continue a dialogue with the text and demonstrate the limitations of previous explorations of the text" (Hoy, 1978, p. 167) is unacceptable.

Always, the important thing to bear in mind in the study of literature (and the teaching of literature) is that interpretation is a very natural "response" to literature,

as it is to life. As Hudson (1972) states:

And we, all of us, are interpreters, 'hermeneuts' - creatures who pan for sense in the muddy waters of human transaction, and who, if we are interested in people, collect this sense into the bundles of remembered event, belief and fantasy that constitute the human biography (p. 163).

To stifle interpretation in the classroom or to fail to nurture it defeats the very purpose which literature is designed to serve.

#### Literature and Culture

We live, then, in both a social and a cultural environment, and only the cultural environment, the world we study in the arts and sciences, can provide the kind of standards and values we need if we're to do anything better than adjust.

- Northrop Frye -

That literature is a product of a culture, and a reflection of the values, beliefs and aspirations of the culture to which it belongs appears so obvious as to go without saying. One has only to be aware of modern day interest in "provincial literature" and "national literature" to recognize the trust instilled in literature by society to capture and preserve those things which give a people the unique characteristic of a "culture". Chiari (1977) refers to this when he states that art

has at its best an archetypal validity which expresses both the individual creative mind at a given historical moment and the mind and history of a race, of a civilization, and of man himself (p. 16).

As such, it is an image of man in society at a given point in time but, much more than that, it can also be a vision of the goals and dreams of man in his continual struggle for knowledge and wisdom.

The importance of culture in man's life is suggested by Hunt (1982) who notes that

each of us is not just an information processor but the product of a particular culture and its belief system. We perceive the world through the special focus of the values we have learned from parents, schools, books, and peers. These values become part of our decision-making processes (p. 359).

One would be naive, however, if one were to believe that all the influences of a culture are positive ones. In a recent book addressing the problems of humanity in contemporary society, Ervin Laszlo (1978) points to the notion that mankind's limits are "inner" limits of psychological, political, and cultural origins (p. 3). Just as one should recognize what is worthy of preservation in one's culture, so should that which is in need of change be recognized. As Laszlo (1978) claims,

the challenge to cultures is to overcome the inner limits inherent in negative thinking, and in clinging to obsolete methods of seeking to bring to pass whatever positive vision still holds sway in society. The great humanistic visions of our cultural heritage must be looked at afresh and reaffirmed, yet the practices associated with them must be revised ... the people perish not only where there is no vision, but also where there is no positive vision, and where there is no timely and adequate revision (p. 36).

Much of the positive vision needed by mankind is not only reflected in literature but, indeed, can be discovered or attained through literature. The greatest literature, that worthy of study in our schools, has survived because it holds just such a vision of mankind.

In this respect, it is simply not true that in order for literature to be truly relevant to a culture, it must be of the culture which studies it. In fact, this notion appears to be outdated in an age where the unification of mankind is a necessity to the survival of humanity. Steiner (1974) claims that the critic, to fulfill his true functions, should not "stay in his own garden" (p. 9) or limit himself to the literature of his own culture. While it is necessary and even praise-worthy to call attention to and examine that literature of quality which stems from a given culture, the student of literature should not be limited to a monotonous, and often paltry diet of his own cultural literature. If man is to exceed his inner limits at all rather than merely to "adjust" in his rapidly changing world, the material used for study in schools must be of the quality to broaden horizons rather than to aid in the development of cultural tunnel vision.

#### Pop Culture

Contemporary society manifests another element which has potential for stagnating the inner growth of individuals. That element includes pop music, pop art, and pop literature,

all of which fall under the common umbrella term, "pop culture".

"Pop" is defined as

an abbreviation of 'popular' used in the arts since the 1950's to signify work employing aesthetic or symbolic elements calculated to appeal to a modern mass audience. The basis of the calculation is normally commercial, though the use made of the elements is often not (The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, p. 485).

Due to what has become a characteristic lack of depth and significance, the connotations surrounding the term "pop culture" are largely negative. This is frightening when one considers the pervasive appeal of this culture (or cult-ure).

In a recent review of an exhibit of the popular art of Ed Ruscha, John Bently Mays of The Globe and Mail refers to Los Angeles, the home of Ruscha and the inspiration for most of his art, as "the world's only town where people (including artists) have lifestyles, not lives". Mays should not have been so restricting in his comment. Because of the incredible power of the media and technology, popular culture is fast succeeding in forming generations of people who are in grave danger of living "lifestyles, not lives". Hockheimer (1972) is adamant about this effect of popular art. He refers to popularity as "the unrestricted accommodation of the people to what the amusement industry thinks they like" (p. 290). Popular culture, as such, threatens man's thinking abilities and, thus, endangers his freedom and his control of his own life. Gadamer (1981) points to this threat:

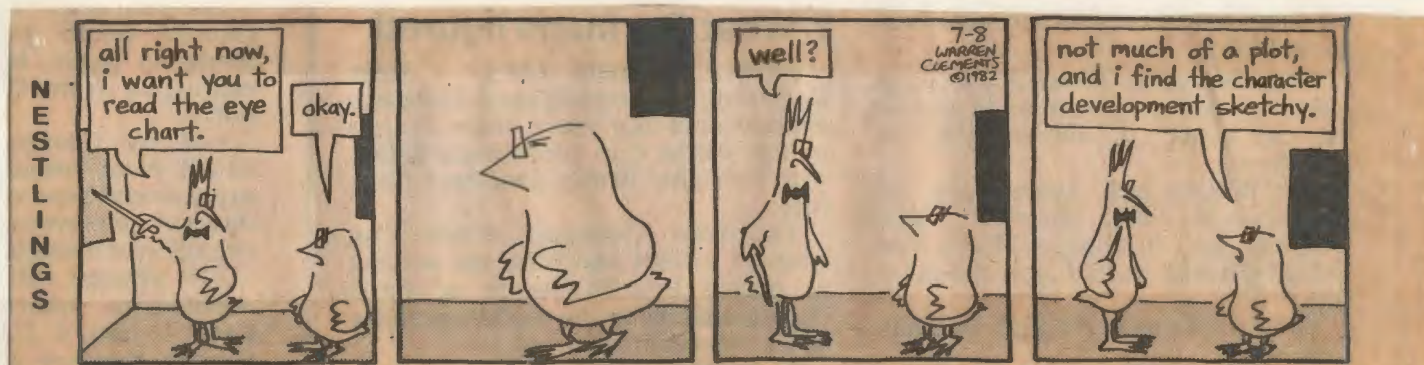
A result of technology is that it leads to such a manipulation of human society, of the formation of public opinion, of the life conduct of everyone, of the disposition of each individual's time between job and family, and it takes our breath away (p. 3).

Gass (1970) is more insidious in his comment:

It is the principle function of popular culture - though hardly its avowed purpose - to keep men from understanding what is happening to them, for social unrest would surely follow, and who knows what outbursts of revenge and rage (p. 272).

It is obvious from these comments that philosophers and scholars view pop culture as "doing" something to man who, in return, appears unable to retaliate.

It is in this respect that literature and criticism are of such importance. Scott and Brock (1972, p. 6) claim that "man cannot completely repress the critical impulse because it is a part of learning how to act toward something or someone". This irrepressible critical impulse is depicted humorously by Warren Clements (1982) in his comicstrip, "Nestlings":



The critical impulse, however, needs to be developed or else it atrophies. This development is even more pertinent in light of the threats posed by popular culture. Only the ability to critically examine the forces surrounding us in modern society will preserve man's ability to choose among alternatives. Frye (1964), in reference to advertising, states that

our reaction to advertising is really a form of literary criticism ... The end of the process is not to reject all advertising, but to develop our own vision of society to the point at which we can choose what we want out of what's offered to us and let the rest go ... This principle holds not only for advertising but for most aspects of social life (pp. 138-9).

To fail to nurture and develop the critical impulse in students is to neglect a major aspect of their growth and development as individual and social beings.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

## Literature Course Descriptions 7-12: Newfoundland

The following is a description of each of the literature courses offered in Grades Seven through Twelve in Newfoundland and Labrador. Each description is accompanied by a brief annotation which explains the basis goals of the literature course under discussion.

### Junior High School

English 7. The Grade Seven literature course includes the study of the short story, the novel, the autobiography, the biography, poetry, and drama. Material may be organized by genre and/or theme, with representative pieces of Newfoundland literature included in all aspects of literature study. In all areas of literature study at the Grade Seven level, the emphasis is on the enjoyment of literature rather than the formal study of literature.

The course aims to expose students at the Grade Seven level to a variety of literature in order that they may come to know literature of worth and to appreciate their literary heritage.

At present, textbooks for the course include: Out and About, an anthology selected and edited by three educators in the province; Openings, an anthology of literature of Newfoundland and Labrador; Front Stage Series, a collection of plays (including two Newfoundland plays); and a junior novels reading list of various authors and titles (Program of Studies, pp. 42-3).

English 8. The Grade Eight literature course is structured in the same way as the Grade Seven literature course. The Grade Eight literature course includes the study of the short story, the novel, the autobiography, the article, the essay, poetry, and drama. Material may be organized by genre and/or theme, with representative pieces of Newfoundland literature included in all aspects of the programme. Again, the emphasis of the Grade Eight literature course is on the enjoyment of literature rather than the formal study of literature. There are, however, a greater number of "concepts" suggested for study at this level.

The course aims to expose students at the Grade Eight level to a variety of literature in order that they may come to recognize literature of worth and to appreciate their literary heritage.

Textbooks for the Grade Eight literature course include: Crossings, an anthology selected and edited by three educators in the province; Stages, an anthology of Newfoundland literature; Front Stage Series, a collection of plays (including two Newfoundland plays); and a junior novels reading list of various authors and titles (Program of Studies, pp. 43-4).

English 9. The Grade Nine literature course is structured in the same way as the Grade Seven and Grade Eight literature courses. The Grade Nine literature course includes

the study of the short story, the novel, the essay, poetry, and drama. Again, material may be organized by genre and/or theme, with representative pieces of Newfoundland literature included in all aspects of literature study. At this level of the English program, the emphasis shifts from the study of literature for enjoyment to a more formal study of literature. At this level, too, the number of concepts to be covered increases in number and difficulty.

The basic aim of the Grade Nine literature course is the same as that of the Grades Seven and Eight courses - to expose students to a variety of literature in order that they may come to recognize literature of worth and to appreciate their literary heritage.

Material for the Grade Nine literature course includes: Exits and Entrances, an anthology selected and edited by three provincial educators; Passages, an anthology of Newfoundland literature; Voices, an anthology integrating language and literature study (for use with below average students); Front Stage Series, a collection of plays (including two Newfoundland plays); Romeo and Juliet (for above average students); and a list of ten novels, two of which are recommended for intensive study (Program of Studies, pp. 44-5).

### Senior High School

Thematic Literature 1200. Thematic Literature 1200 provides students at Level One of the Senior High School programme the opportunity to study literature which will "not only provide reading pleasure and enjoyment but also provide self-understanding and the basis for personal values"

(Course Description, p. 3). The course is organized around selected themes: the search for meaning, the supernatural, the fantastic, the unknown, nature, religion, death, war, conflict, humor, animals, etcetera. Topics are selected from a variety of genres: the short story, the novel, the essay, poetry and drama.

The course aims to help students at Level One of the Senior High School programme to experience literature in written, oral, and enacted forms, to respond to literature emotionally, reflectively, and creatively, and to value literature in various ways.

Materials for Thematic Literature 1200 include: Quest, a book of poetry (separated into themes); Strawberries and Other Secrets, a book of short stories; Baffles of Wind and Tide, an anthology of Newfoundland literature; Comparative Mythology; The Holdin' Ground, a play by Newfoundland author Ted Russell; The Winslow Boy, a play; Searchlight Package, a collection of short plays; and a list of nine novels, two of which must be chosen for intensive study (Program of Studies, pp. 60-1).

Literary Heritage 2201. Literary Heritage 2201 provides students at this level the opportunity to study "significant works of their literary heritage that can provide reading pleasure and enjoyment for life enrichment and fulfillment" (Course Description, p. 3). The course also strives to help students recognize and appreciate the forces which have shaped society, the literature which has reached acclaim in our society and the many changes in society reflected in literature.

The course aims to help students to experience literature in written, oral, and enacted forms, to respond to literature emotionally, reflectively, and creatively, and to value literature in various ways.

Text materials for Literary Heritage 2201 include: An Anthology of Verse; Twelfth Night or Julius Caesar and the Searchlight Package of plays; Myth and Meaning; Literary Essays and Short Stories; and a selection of novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from which a minimum of two must be studied (Program of Studies, p. 62).

Thematic Literature 3201. Thematic Literature 3201 reflects the same structure and design as Thematic Literature 1200. Themes for the course include the individual and society, stress and conflict, leadership and initiative, inner quests, perplexities of the present, the unexplained and unexplored, and identity. Topics for the course are selected from a variety of genres with all genres ultimately included in literature study.



This course, too, reflects the aims of the other literature courses of the Senior High School programme - to help students to experience literature in written, oral, and enacted forms; to respond to literature emotionally, reflectively, and creatively, and to value literature in various ways.

Text materials for Thematic Literature 3201 include: Theme and Image (Book One), a collection of poems (separated into themes); Man's Search for Values, an anthology of essays, short stories, and poems; Writer's Workshop, an anthology of essays and short stories; Dramatic Literature, a collection of ten quality plays; Merchant of Venice; a selection of five novels of various authors and titles; and a selection of four non-fiction titles, each of which deals with Newfoundland and/or Newfoundlanders (Program of Studies, pp. 61-2).

At present, only three of the possible six literature courses for the re-organized Senior High School programme have been completed. It is expected that the remaining three courses, Canadian Literature 2204, Folk Literature 3203, and Literary Heritage 3202 will reflect the aims and the design of the already developed courses. Previews of the planning stages of these courses appear to confirm these expectations.

APPENDIX B

### My Experience as a High School Literature Student

I remember the readers, Gallant Goals, Valiant Ventures (the other titles escape me) and the ecstasy that those held for me. "English" was my favorite subject - that special time of the day when for at least part of the class period (and even all of it, if that day's story was a "long" one!), we all got to read. At that time I didn't know anyone "couldn't" read and would never have entertained the thought that anyone didn't enjoy reading. This was the land of make believe so powerfully pushed into my heart and soul by the print on the page that oftentimes I would be moved to laughter, tears, anger, anxiety, fear, pain ...

Of course, it was not always so much fun in school (but it usually beat the rest of the day, anyway). There were the times when we had to read aloud, round-robin, and I'd spend most of the time before "my turn" wiping my sweaty hands on my grey flannel skirt, anticipating the snickers when I came to an 's' word, or worse still, a whole bunch of them together. That's when the teacher would stop me and say "Now, repeat that sssssloowly, so the class will know what you've read". It didn't help even when I counted ahead to the paragraph I had to read and practiced silently while others read.

It was even more painful when some of the others were reading and you could just see their discomfort. With some, the teacher (and the class) almost had to tell them every second word and then they read so slowly that to keep my

sanity I had to read ahead on my own and come back when a "good" reader had his turn. It was usually awful.

Then; "Wasn't that a nice story?"

And, "Now, answer the questions on page 117."

That was usually no fun either. Sometimes after a story, I just wanted to think, or ask questions, not answer them, or even just talk about things. No. Instead, the class wrote neat answers to unclear questions (when they weren't stupid questions like "How do you think Sam felt when he saw his pet dog get killed by the milk truck?") and then the bell rang ... and the phones rang all over town that night at the homes of the Grade Sevens who wondered "What do you have for #3?" Not that it mattered. Next day, the teacher would read the correct answer from her answer book, smile sweetly when tallying our scores, and then move on to the next story.

The only poetry I remembered from my junior high years were ballads (I learned that term during my senior year English course!) like "The Cremation of Sam McGee", or "The Lion and the Glove". Drama consisted of plays read in class with the best readers given parts to read in unimaginative monotones which appeared quite acceptable to the teacher sitting at the desk in front of the class. Novels were not a part of my junior literature classes in either a direct or indirect way. That aspect of my reading, as with many others, was reserved for home.

Yes, if it were not for the readers, and the immense joy the stories there brought me, there would have been little room for the subject of "English" in my life. It was the joy gained through reading that made me want to write my experiences and, in attempting to do so, I quickly came to the realization that this was a very difficult thing to do. These writers who provided so much pleasure to me were extremely talented! This was not something one could just "do". And it was not something everyone could do in the same way. I wanted to learn more about what literature was and how it was made.

This opportunity was not to come until my final year of high school. The "study" of literature in the first two years of high school proceeded in much the same way as it had in junior high. The material was of a higher quality and there was more variety but the methodology was basically the same. "Answer the questions on page 23" could have been directions for the "study" of a short story or a poem (the difference was known through appearance only ... What's an essay?) A spark of discussion sometimes appeared when, given the opportunity to read an answer orally, a classmate looking for a diversion from the stifling monotony would challenge with "Sir, that's not what I got!" Disputes were invariably settled with reference to the teacher's manual (a book teachers referred to without the slightest hint of embarrassment, now that I think of it!).

The novels were there but I remember very little about them, not even the grade in which I "studied" them. Captains Courageous comes to mind as does The Pearl (specifically, a three page essay on "Why Kino threw the pearl back into the sea"). The study of drama so impressed me in Grades Nine and Ten as to elude my memory altogether.

Despite the way in which literature was treated during my school day, it did not dampen my enthusiasm for it. However, I remember more than one disgusted comment and mistreated English text when that class time came in the day. Generally, most of my classmates were turned off, and rightly so. After all, what did this really have to do with anything? It was a futile exercise in which just about everyone was doomed to embarrassment, failure, or both.

The only bright spot in my whole high school education in terms of the study of literature came at the very end. It was so radically different to encounter a teacher who wanted discussion, who was willing to consider more than one point of view, who told us what a point of view was, who encouraged us to interpret drama, poetry, short stories, essays, novels and to discover the differences between these forms, who exposed us to outside reading in abundance, and who encouraged us to pursue our own interests in the study of literature.

But by this time, for many it was too late. I had never perceived of literature as something to really struggle with in a negative sense but this was exactly how many of my

classmates were forced to see it. With an entirely new approach to this subject, many students who were turned off before, worked their way to the bottom of the heap, lost in the catching up needed to be done. That was a hard year, but a redeeming one. There was someone out there who was willing to grapple with literature and treat it honestly, acknowledging its difficulties but nurturing its joys to the benefit of those students who managed to survive a system that had abused, mistreated, but never allowed for the true "teaching" of literature.

APPENDIX C



### Reflections of a Teacher of Literature

Undaunted by the mistreatment of literature during my own school experience and ignoring the skepticism of my peers throughout twenty odd university English courses, I, like a modern Don Quixote, set out to conquer the world in the teaching of English. I would not teach "as I had been taught." In my classroom, literature would be meaningful, relevant, and even fun! My measure of success is not the issue here but, like Don Quixote, my experiences (I hesitate to call them adventures!) with other English teachers, often in whose aftermath I had to work along the way, certainly are.

I quickly learned, in my limited experience of four years as a secondary English teacher, that my memories of how literature had been taught to me were not unique. Rather, the situation which those memories recalled was prevalent, even a decade after I had left high school. No, Rome was not built in a day and, yes, change is often slow to come, but neither of these cliches is comforting when one sees an area of study with the utmost potential dying a slow death in the schools.

It is not uncommon in the initial year of a new teaching position to be continually reminded by students of "how our old teacher did it" - not the most reliable insight into a predecessor's methods but certainly not to be discounted as pure fabrication. Thus, I had many "old memories" quickly and painfully revived. I often thought of how my senior year English teacher must have felt!

From the experiences I have gathered in an as yet very short teaching career, it is my firm conviction that English is hardly taught at all in many of our schools (I am not generalizing, I hope, to the detriment of those who strive, each day, in our classrooms to keep the true spirit of literature teaching alive). Grammar is ignored almost completely and literature rarely is raised above the teaching of comprehension skills through the use of a poem, short story or novel.

All too often, precious class time is used in the oral reading of a novel from front to cover with little or no attention to form, content or meaning. How relevant literature is to students' lives is, at times, not even a concern. In some cases, relevancy is narrowly defined as that which stems from one's own culture. Quality and depth are concerns which, too, are quickly falling by the wayside. Students are being smothered with literature that requires little effort to "teach" and no challenge to interpret.

An English curriculum exists which allows for the exclusion of genres, poetry in particular, which is difficult to teach for the untrained English teacher and oftentimes not pleasant to teach for even the trained (there are too many barriers! The "kids" don't like poetry!). The curriculum is also seriously in danger of overloading on literature of Newfoundland and Labrador which, culturally important as it is, is narrow in scope, often low in quality, and certainly

not the "be all and end all" for students of literature.

In fact, the English curriculum is so loosely constructed that I am firmly convinced that no two English teachers in the province cover the same material in a given year. Yet students, at the end of their senior year, are expected to write a province-wide, standardized English exam. The variety of responses to the items on that exam is testimony to the lack of consistency in English teaching in the province. It is indeed sad when senior students cannot cope with the concepts of theme, irony, etcetera in a novel which they have spent six weeks studying during the school year. It is sadder still when students' "interpretations" of a novel, story, or poem are so limited as to indicate that interpretation is not a common exercise in their studies or, instead, are so "alike" as to indicate a regurgitation of the teacher's "correct" interpretation.

During my four years as an English teacher I became aware of many questionable practices in the literature classrooms of this province: the round-robin reading of stories and novels with no study, analysis, or discussion; the total ignorance of curriculum guidelines (where they exist) and departmental policies on the teaching of literature; the complete absence of reference texts; the glorified adherence to prescribed texts, page by page, story by story; the teaching of select genres, i.e. drama, to the almost total exclusion of other genres; the failure by English teachers to understand what literature is, is about, and is for; the

failure to recognize the importance of advanced reading skills in the study of literature; the treatment of literature by teachers as another social science; the exclusion of a class for a "chosen few" who cope with the English teacher's scholarly methods; the failure to teach literature humanely; and, finally, the gravest sin of all, the failure to persevere in the teaching of literature as a lifetime devotion to relevancy, meaningfulness, richness of experience, endless alternatives, and optimum humanity.

That literature is not being taught, or is being taught poorly in our schools is, from my experience, unquestionable. In this province, the teaching of English does not have the respect it should have in the curriculum. In an age of science, no educator in authority is willing to put anyone but a science specialist in a science classroom but yet anyone who is available (not willing or able!) is requisitioned to teach English. It is appalling when one considers the complexities of language and literature at the simplest level that this would be the case. Less than half of this province's English teachers are trained in the subject area and the results of this lack of expertise are evident in all our vocational schools, colleges, and universities.

For the most part, the situations I have described (limited as they are, yet verified by other English teachers) would be sufficient to dispel the notions and ideals of even Don Quixote in the English classroom. There is no solace in

heroism gained by fighting losing battles and that is the reality every dedicated English teacher in this province faces. It seems that every educator is somehow "aware" of the problems but unable or unwilling to realize the solutions. Or maybe it is just that educators are aware of the consequences, but not the problems.

Either way, it is obvious that the teaching of literature has not progressed a great deal in the last 10-15 years, at least not from the perspective of this one-time student/one-time teacher. New programmes (not necessarily progressive programmes) are developed, English teachers' conferences come and go, school years come and go, students come and go, yet things remain unchanged. How utterly disillusioning that this is so in an era where man's ultimate humanity, the goal of literature, may be the world's only hope for survival.

APPENDIX D

Warren Clements,  
c/o Editorial Dept.,  
The Globe and Mail.

August 3, 1982

Ursula A. Kelly,  
Apt. 107,  
Building 4B,  
Valleyview Apartments,  
107 Terra Nova Road,  
St. John's, Newfoundland,  
A1B 1G1

Dear Ursula Kelly,

I have received your letter of July 15, and am pleased to give you permission to use the Nestlings strip of July 8/82 in your thesis.

Finding themselves in a thesis will be heady stuff for the birds, whose most memorable brush with higher education was being pushed out of the nest at a very young age in an effort to teach them to fly. The instruction met with varying success.

Best of luck in your project, and thank you for having the courtesy to ask.

Yours sincerely,

Warren Clements







