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Developing Personality through Literature

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made. With only the alterations involved in dealing with new kinds of beginnings and endings in their structures, the techniques of narrow-context literary criticism apply to the analysis of nonfictional materials as well. It is the neglect of these techniques in English classes with which the colleges (somewhat smugly) reproach the secondary schools when they express their regret that "high-school graduates cannot read."

The chief disadvantage of broad-context criticism is that its scope is so great that it cannot have the precision and sharp focus on the details of structure of a work which narrow-context technique will yield. The chief advantage of broad-context criticism is that it makes possible the teaching of the relation of isolated skills and subjects to life and society and our ideals for their improvement. Facts and skills may be irrelevant or detrimental if their possessors are ignorant of or uninterested in the pursuit of what is good and beautiful and true. Of this the recent war is an all too vivid illustration. And it is because of our awareness that

questions of value are always of the most importance in education, rather than because of some transitory breath from the spirit of our age, that we will never find a narrow-context analysis satisfying, in literature or elsewhere, until we have integrated it into a larger frame and judged its value in the total structure. We cannot do this well until we can grasp the parts that we are integrating with ease and precision; but the grasping of those parts is important principally because it is the first step in their integration.

Broad-context techniques, in literary criticism and elsewhere, are like the telescope for modern science. We bring closer the most distant stars and see the universe as a related whole. But narrow-context techniques are like the microscope; and until we have seen the details of the structure of our immediate surroundings, we lack the knowledge to understand the vistas that the telescope reveals, to synthesize them, and to come to know ourselves and our place in the world of which we are a part.

## *Developing Personality through Literature*<sup>1</sup>

SARAH I. ROODY<sup>2</sup>

**I**F YOU go shopping and spend all but fifty cents of your money to buy a suit, you certainly do not expect any restaurant to give you a three-dollar dinner for your remaining half-dollar just because that is all you have left. You content yourself with whatever you can buy with your fifty cents and feast your soul on the picture of how handsome you will look in the new suit. Yet many a high-

<sup>1</sup> Read at the convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, November, 1946.

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school girl with just twenty-four hours a day to spend expects a passing grade in intermediate algebra on the strength of her performance in the dramatic-club play or the number of hours that she has devoted to rehearsing with the all-county band. She has not had time to do her lessons, but why should that fact interfere with her passing the course? Any gardener who has planted potatoes rather expects his crop to be potatoes, but sometimes a high-school boy who has played truant feels surprised and resent-

ful upon reaping the customary punishment and thinks that the principal just has no sense of humor and simply cannot remember that he was once a boy himself. In short, perhaps the average adolescent, as well as a great many of us adults, is just a bit immature!

In other words, he is inclined to believe only what he wishes to believe and to close his eyes to what he would rather not see. He is very likely to be convinced that he is always in the right and to blame other people for his mistakes. He has not yet learned to sacrifice a temporary pleasure for the sake of a long-term advantage. In many cases his conception of life is quite largely compounded from what he has encountered in motion pictures, radio plays, and certain types of books.

Very recently many eighteen-year-olds had to learn with shocking and brutal suddenness about some of the grimmest aspects of life. It is to be hoped that such a terrible coming-of-age will not be required of our present pupils. Whatever their immediate prospects may be, however, it will not be many years before the responsibilities of life will be upon them and they will be expected to think and behave like adults.

Can we not, as their teachers, at least show them how to approach a problem, to view it objectively and see it as it is, and to solve it on that basis? Can we not teach them how to guard against letting their emotions stand between them and the truth? I believe that we can.

The senior English course in the high school at Nyack, New York, seeks to help the students to develop a scientific attitude toward life-problems and to become better-adjusted individuals. A large part of the course involves the teaching of true-to-life literature as interpreted with the help of simple lessons in mental

hygiene. By presenting to our classes literature that pictures life truly and by interpreting that literature with the help of psychology, we believe that we enable the pupils to understand life better. By means of this clearer understanding of life, we believe, we are helping them to face its problems more realistically.

True-to-life literature, for the purposes of this course, means that which is neither sentimental nor cynical. More specifically, it means books that are psychologically true. The characters in such a story are individuals rather than types, neither flawless heroes nor unmitigated villains. They react to their experiences as real people would react and in accordance with their individual natures. They develop under their experiences. They cope with such problems as all human beings might encounter, and they either solve them or fail to solve them according to their circumstances and their natures. Their difficulties do not disappear at the discovery of some magic formula or at the intervention of a *deus ex machina*. The outcome of the story results naturally from the combination of the characters and the circumstances. The ending is not unnaturally happy, nor is it melodramatically unhappy.

The lessons in mental hygiene that are taught in connection with the true-to-life literature are very simple and are expressed chiefly in nontechnical terms. They include: explanations of the fundamental motives from which the actions of all human beings spring; the various ways in which people react when they meet with obstacles; the ways in which many people try to evade reality in order to escape the necessity of solving their problems; how to deal with life-problems in a normal and mature way; and how to develop the kind of personality

one would like to have. The subject matter is adapted, in highly simplified form, from Schaffer's *Psychology of Adjustment*, supplemented by Howard and Patry's *Menial Health: Its Principles and Practice*, and various hints from mental-hygiene bulletins.

The fundamental human motives are taught first. We have used a simple, non-technical analysis given by Dr. Nolan C. Lewis in the *Mental Hygiene News*. Fundamental human motives are defined as wishes common to virtually all human beings, desires so strong and so persistent that they must be satisfied if the individual is to be a normal human being. We have adapted Dr. Lewis' enumeration of these powerful cravings as follows: the desire to be free from illness, pain, and fear; to possess power; to assist and take care of others, especially to protect the weak and needy; to accumulate property or possessions; to gain more knowledge; to love someone and to be loved in return; to have sympathetic and understanding friends; to gain attention—favorable attention, if possible; to be like other people, but not so much like them as to lose our individuality; to be approved of, at least by our own crowd; to have personal beauty; to seek self-improvement; to express ourselves; and to identify ourselves with some idealistic cause. The pupils are told that in a normal, healthy life no fundamental motive is allowed to develop out of proportion to the others. The idea is presented that the happiest people are those who choose their ruling motives wisely and learn how to subordinate their lesser desires without actually stifling any of them.

The explanations just described serve as the starting point for a discussion of many novels, biographies, plays, and stories that the pupils have already

read. To many of the pupils it is a new idea that in most great literature the things the characters do are of less importance than are the reasons why they do them. To them the books take on a new significance when viewed as the history of human desires. At this point the class reads several stories and biographical sketches in which the action clearly grows out of the protagonist's ruling motives. A few stories are introduced that show the overdevelopment of some desire.

The next step is to make clear that, although it is necessary to get an outlet for every fundamental motive, it is not by any means necessary always to have one's own way in order to satisfy those deep-rooted desires. At this point a unit on the reading of biography is usually introduced. The lives of great people who have encountered tremendous obstacles demonstrate that sometimes one can achieve deeper and richer happiness through accepting one's handicaps and achieving success despite their presence than one could ever gain by advancing unchecked to immediate triumphs. Some very great people have even compensated for inferiority in some one field by striving harder and making extraordinary achievement in another phase of activity. Various ways in which a well-adjusted individual can deal with obstacles are discussed at this time in the course.

One cannot read far in the pages of any type of literature, however, without coming upon characters who have not learned how to react normally when they fail to get what they want. A series of lessons on escape mechanisms is therefore taught to help the pupils understand the behavior of such characters and also to help them become better adjusted themselves.

False compensation is the first escape mechanism discussed. It is explained as follows: For various reasons, a great many persons develop a chronic feeling of failure, a conviction that they cannot hold their own in the competitions of life. These people, unconsciously convinced that they are inferior, are likely to resort to some unrealistic method of obtaining a feeling of superiority—a feeling produced by making a show of apparent success not founded upon any actual accomplishment. Such people may bolster their egos by boasting or even lying about their achievements. They may cheat. They may belittle the achievements of persons who have succeeded where they themselves have failed. Such methods yield a feeling of superiority, but it is only temporary. It does not give the individual true confidence and security. Many instances of false compensation are to be found in literature. One example that always appeals to adolescents is Sherwood Anderson's "I'm a Fool," a story of a boy who lied about his social status in order to impress a lovely girl, and thereby deprived himself of the opportunity to become better acquainted with her. When he realized that she liked him for his own sake and not because she thought he was wealthy, it was too late to rectify his error. Then he knew that he had been a fool.

Rationalizing, or wishful thinking, is explained very simply to the pupils. Everyone, they are told, has a tendency to see what he wishes to see and to close his eyes to everything else. People are particularly eager to believe that they are always in the right. Even when they do admit to themselves that they have made a mistake, they like to believe that it was someone else's fault. It is quite human to let one's emotions prevent one

from seeing things as they are, but people who are emotionally mature guard against this tendency. Rationalizing often stands in the rationalizer's own way. Because he always seeks consolation from blaming someone else for his failures, he may lose all his incentive to bestir himself and achieve the real satisfaction of actual success. Even when wishful thinking does not really prevent one from exerting himself, it may waste his time or make him appear laughably childish in other people's eyes. Many amusing stories are available to illustrate this tendency. One is "The Stolen Day," which tells of a little boy who convinced himself that he had inflammatory rheumatism because he wanted to stay out of school and go fishing. After his father heard what had happened, the boy did have aches and pains for several hours but not from inflammatory rheumatism.

Another escape mechanism, which some psychologists call "withdrawing," is described to the pupils as the lazy habit of turning one's back on the struggle to secure the real satisfactions of actual life, which are difficult to achieve, and taking refuge in an imagined world where happiness comes easily. Day dreaming is a common form of withdrawing. Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Miniver Cheevy" gives a perfect picture of a day dreamer who scorned the prosaic modern world in which he lived and spent his time thinking of romantic medieval days. An instance of withdrawing that always touches and stirs the students is Willa Cather's story "Paul's Case," which concerns a sensitive boy who met tragedy because he could not reconcile the real world with the more beautiful imagined one in which he tried to live.

Closely allied to actual day dreaming

is excessive indulgence in motion pictures, radio plays, and books that give an oversimplified conception of life. Though a small amount of escape reading may be a desirable form of relaxation from the strain of living, large doses of it are harmful, especially to a young person, whose conception of life is in the process of being formed. Not only may it give him a mistaken idea of what to expect from life, but it may actually delay his emotional growing up by encouraging him in certain infantile tendencies.

The chronic escape reader does not strive to win the success that he craves, nor does he learn to satisfy himself with the degree of achievement that is possible for him. Instead he gets an unreal satisfaction from identifying himself with some character in the story, who is always successful, always popular, and always in the right. This reader, also, may lose his incentive to meet life as it is.

For these reasons a considerable amount of time in our course is devoted to teaching the pupils some of the earmarks of false or pseudorealistic fiction—books that give an oversimplified picture of life.

First, a diagnostic test is given to find out which pupils are fooled by improbable coincidences, unmotivated changes of heart, distortion of given facts, and other tricks of pseudorealism. Then, with the test as a starting point, several pieces of fiction are analyzed—some picturing life truly and others giving a false conception of it. Certain examples of truly great literature are presented, in which the outcomes result naturally from the combination of the characters and the circumstances.

When this point in the course has been reached, many students have already begun to realize how a person's

character is developed by his experiences. In classes that are capable of understanding the intricacies of character development, a few separate lessons are devoted to that subject. Certain points usually need clarification. For example, pupils are likely to believe that a person's character may be completely reversed as a result of some insignificant occurrence. We try to show them that development in character is usually both slow and continuous. Drastic changes result only from drastic causes. Even a religious conversion remakes a character chiefly because it gives the subject a new goal and a new incentive, not because it gives him new traits. An experience may call forth qualities hitherto latent, it may increase a tendency already present, or it may modify an existing characteristic. No one event is likely, however, to establish in a character a quality that has hitherto been entirely foreign to it. Several novels and plays with which the pupils are familiar are discussed in this connection, and usually some one piece of literature is studied for the purpose of watching the growth of the protagonist.

The procedures that I have described are those used with the average class of high-school seniors. Superior classes, if they request the privilege, are taught some of the more technical terms and allowed to go more deeply into the relevant phases of psychology. For groups below average, some of the units are often modified, sometimes omitted entirely. The plans are kept very flexible. If time permits, a series of lessons on the scientific method of investigation is taught, and a unit of research reading on some current problem is carried on in such a way as to encourage the pupils to search for the truth rather than seek to prove a preconceived opinion.

This course originated in a two-year investigation of the parallel between the adolescent's reaction to fiction and his attitude toward life. The investigation yielded implications that a close relation exists. Then followed two successive yearly experiments in separate experimental classes matched with control groups. The experimental class was given instruction similar to that described in this paper. The control group was taught in a more traditional way. We never succeeded in keeping a close enough control to make a statistical comparison significant, for the pupils in the control class were continually getting hold of the experimental material and reading it. The teacher, too, found herself slipping into the experimental methods while instructing the control group.

Despite the unreliability of a statisti-

cal check, however, the results obtained in the experimental group seemed to the teacher, the school psychologist, the dean of girls, and the superintendent of schools so valuable that the method and the materials have been adopted for use as part of the regular course in senior English. They have been so used for four years since the close of the last experiment.

What are the noticeable results? For most pupils a deeper understanding of the literature studied by the class, more mature taste in the selection of books for individual reading, a more serious attitude in the classroom, and increased eagerness to develop maturity. For the teacher, the conviction that no matter how confusingly the methods and the objectives of the teaching of English may change, here is one steadfast star by which she may set her course.

## *Language and Human Relations*<sup>1</sup>

WILFRED EBERHART<sup>2</sup>

**M**ANKIND today lives under the shadow of a gigantic question mark: Is it possible for the two billion human beings inhabiting this spinning globe so to order their lives that civilization will not vanish from the earth? For that portion of humanity living within the confines of the United States the question may be read thus: Can we learn, before it is too late, to live at peace with ourselves and with the rest of the world?

What the answer to this question is, no one knows. It is only realistic, however, to note that there are those who feel that the second World War is but

the prelude to a third and that the devastated cities of Europe are but a preview of the larger devastation that is to come. The fires of racial and religious hatred were deliberately fanned by ruthless dictators in wartime, and it is unlikely that they will quickly be put out by the ink upon peace treaties. Palestine has become an international football. The problem of the veto threatens to split the United Nations Security Council. The armed forces of the great powers face each other across European and Asiatic boundary lines. As we look out upon the world, we feel, as Matthew Arnold felt:

We are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle  
and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

<sup>1</sup> Read at the convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, November, 1946.

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