

# TO HELL WITH



# THE SYLLABUS

BY R. N. FARR

“Book equals Study equals Boredom.” Last spring I was invited to take over classes in Literature of the Western World at one of the universities in the New York area while the professor was nursing the flu. What I learned from teaching astonished me. I had not believed it possible for anyone to prevent humans of average intelligence, and young humans at that, from enjoying worthwhile books. I have heard of banning books in Boston, and of imposing fines upon students found reading rubbishy bestsellers, but I was not aware that there is something shameful about reading good books for pleasure.

Apparently my impression that the overwhelming reason for reading the good books is the delight they yield—a joy guaranteed by the considered judgment of mankind—is all wrong. For in the classroom I had it brought home to me that many of today’s students are reading to discover the social, economic and spiritual forces manifested in the masterpieces, but they are not reading for pleasure at all. A mention of Homer educes glum looks

from students, and when one makes reference to Shakespeare, these young people all give gestures of boredom as though his works were a dead language. They regard Dante as tedious, and Plutarch as downright monotonous.

Why? From my observation, the reason seems to be that good books have been so dissected, synthesized and amalgamated—then bottled, corked and labeled in the distillery of classroom criticism—that nearly all of what Trollope calls “the most perfect pleasure that God has prepared for His people” has been destroyed.

For example, the students I was asked to teach had just read Apuleius’ rich, ripe, bawdy yarn *The Golden Ass*. Yet a few questions tossed around the classroom revealed that not one of them had any notion of how poor Lucius came to be turned into an ass. What did they know of the book? They said that it was morally corrupting pagan literature from which Shakespeare had lifted a number of obscene ideas; and they contended that Christian writers had made an “honest woman” out of the pagan

prayer to Isis by turning it into a litany.

Earlier in the term, they had polished off both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in a single week, as a study of "primitive sociological symbolism" — whatever that might be.

Obviously, and almost meticulously, any vague ideas these students may have had that reading can be fun had been annihilated.

"To hell with following the syllabus," I said to myself. "These poor children are drowning in murky criticism and stagnant analysis." I immediately administered artificial respiration in the form of strong draughts of the most delightful passages in Western literature that I could recall from my own reading.

After reciting the exciting evidence of a devilish murder mystery concealed in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, I suddenly turned to the class and remarked: "Of all things a man can see with his eyes, the words of a good book enrich him the most — and that includes TV, Marilyn Monroe, and Grand Canyon!"

There was amazement in their eyes when I suggested, with illustrative examples, that Dickens, Dumas, Dostoevsky, and Dryden (to mention only the D's) did not write to give employment to critics, but to give to readers the kind of enjoyment Montaigne meant when he said that books relieve us from idleness, rescue us from bad company and blunt the edge of our grief.

ARE THEY normal in other ways, these collegians of 1953 for whom the bright edge of literature has been dulled? Unfortunately, they seem to have suffered. Their vocabularies have suffered. Many of them seem to get by wholly on interjections. "Wow!" they say when you announce an examination for next session. "Oh, man!" they exclaim when a pretty girl goes by. With such stunted vocabularies they seem to use their mouths only for eating, smoking, and drinking. When they are forced to turn in a composition, it usually contains many terrifying mistakes in rhetoric. And when it does contain some texture and eloquence, the teacher begins to wonder from what author it has been cribbed.

Was the situation I found in the classroom limited to that one college? Unfortunately, I have found that this was not so. Without exception, observers in other parts of the country have reported to me in their letters that similar conditions do exist elsewhere.

"I have never tried asking English majors whether they sought and read books for pleasure, but I think your proportion of one in fifty would be about normal in this institution. When I was an undergraduate, I behaved like the forty-nine — I who had been a five-or-six-books-a-week reader since the age of seven. There was nothing in my literature classes that drove me to read anything beyond the

assignments." This observation came from Edwin H. Adams of the University of Washington, whose weekly radio broadcast, "Reading for Fun," has had a following in the Seattle area since 1942.

It must be conceded, of course, that very few college students have the power to work steadily at academic subjects until their interest is aroused. At all levels of education, students need guidance in interpreting much of literature, especially poetry and older works, just as we did when we were in school. And it is obvious that some books, *Sartor Resartus* for example, possess little entertainment value. The student must not expect a great book to be a pushover. Indeed, he must be prepared to stretch his mind to meet the author at least a quarter of the way. If, after sincere effort, a man can find no pleasure in a classic, he may lay it aside and take up the sports page or the financial columns. But he should do so regretfully, for he is not depreciating the classic, but recording a limitation in himself.

CERTAINLY all of the blame for this present situation cannot be placed upon teachers and courses of study. It must be spread out to encompass the home. Few boys and girls have acquired a taste for books at home. Small wonder that professors are discouraged by trying to arouse interest term after term in students who have never learned

to read for themselves. It may be only human nature for our instructors to fall back upon what can be weighed and measured, as people often do when they are confronted with a seemingly hopeless situation.

"I'm in the fifties," writes Joseph Henry Jackson, literary editor of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. "When I was a boy, all kids read much more than they do now. They read because their parents had books. There weren't half as many other things to do on a rainy day. So, since there were books, and since there were no other distractions, and since Father and Mother were readers, one learned to read for pleasure. There was even a fine old family custom of reading aloud."

A generation or so ago, this changed. Today's youths have not been exposed to the idea of books anywhere except in school, where a book automatically becomes associated with the classroom. With them, unconsciously, book equals study. It never had a chance to mean anything else.

Many of today's readers seem to prefer books which purport to tell them something about their earning-process, or hobbies, or "how to do it's." Look at the phenomenal sales of books on how to gain weight and how to lose weight, how to invest money, how to build a house, and even the one called *How To Live A Fuller Life*. In the case of that last one, to be sure, they've got the wrong book!

ANOTHER point to consider: what about those publishers who put out textbooks containing samples of the great works set up like classified ads — three columns to the page and in type so small your eyes begin to hurt after reading a single chapter? This is a double crime: first, against the great works they profess to expound; second, against the students.

"Classical literature was spoiled by being taught with over-emphasis on precision — and particularly on grammatical usage and syntactical explanation," writes Professor Gilbert Highet in his book *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford University Press). He refers to what Butler called "insistence on the minutest details," and Osler, "dry husks."

One very excellent way to drive young minds to read for pleasure is the drama.

Certainly, the dramatic reading of a play, or of a book, gives the work new dimensions and stimulates interest. What young person would not rather see the movie than read the book? Although not every professor can be an Emlyn Williams or a Charles Laughton, reading aloud in class will help to send students hunting for further adventures in literature. Isn't this better than a knock-down, drag-out factual breakdown of a book which leaves the students with a notion that both the teacher and the author under discussion ought to see

their psychiatrists before it is too late?

The real problem is to get young people to know and love great books, in the first place. After that, there will be plenty of time for analysis and criticism, and the youngsters can still tear a book apart — if they still wish to.

I move that something realistic be done to reveal the source of enjoyment in good books not only to our students but also to our friends and neighbors. I believe that this could be a happier world, if not a better one, to live in, and that we could have greater cause for confidence in the future if this generation, and the rising generation, learned to read widely, read hugely, read with catholicity, and above all to read with enjoyment.

Anybody got any suggestions?



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