

Those College Writing Courses

BY EDITH MIRRIELES

CATCH an undergraduate on the street and ask him, "What do you write?" and the answer will be "Nothing." Hypnotize him and put the same question, and he takes his normal place along with the rest of adult America. At least three undergraduates out of ten—probably more—cherish writing ambitions. Two out of the three do something about those ambitions while they are still in college. Sometimes they write secretly, thrusting the product into the hands of some favorite instructor for equally secret praise. Oftener they enroll for courses, that art and academic credit may go hand in hand.

Until recently, it has been the custom to sneer a little at this thrifty combination and to sneer still more over the rarity of a student writer's reaching print. Professors of French, no one of whose students can stammer through a sentence or understand one from a live, speaking Frenchman, professors of Public Administration whose graduates are selling insurance, are outspoken in their amazement at the lack of published output from students in writing courses. Beyond college walls, the "why" is even more insistent, for the writing course first found its way into colleges on a trade-school basis and carries still something of its trade-school reputation. And where it did not come in on that basis, it came in on a dilettante one instead. Two or three decades ago—say, in 1910—the instructor who was not regaling his students with anecdotes of the cent-a-word market and his own adventures there was likely to be engaging them in a sentence by sentence analysis of "The Necklace" and reminding them that Jane Austen wrote "Pride and Prejudice" at twenty-one. "See this picture of Chartres Cathedral? Now go build a woodshed like it."

Leaf over a dozen college catalogues for the year 1900, and you will find elementary composition, now and then a course in argumentation. Nothing else. Leaf over a dozen for 1937. Verse writing, short story writing, novel writing, play writing, one-act play writing, radio script writing, scenario writing—all are there.



FOUR MAJOR EPIDEMICS OF INFLUENCE:
O. Henry, Joseph Conrad, Katherine Mansfield,
Ernest Hemingway.

The bay-tree growth of them is equalled only by that of teaching methods courses, pedagogy in 1900, education in 1937. Courses in pedagogy, however, have, in general, been helped from the outside, pinned on by legislators, so to speak. With writing courses, undergraduate insistence more than any other thing has wrung them from none too eager faculties.

The causes for this undergraduate appetite go deep into present academic practice, relate themselves to the scientific spirit and to the resultant presentation of the humanities (literature in especial) on a name-date-influence basis. Unluckily, though, the same scientific spirit has not been applied to a study of the writing classes themselves. If it had been—if, for example, somebody in 1910 had been far-sighted enough to hire a warehouse and preserve in it the stories, plays, poems, outlines for novels produced in any one large college—there would be on hand by now material for such a history, social and literary, of the United States as has yet to be written.

The whole of that history would rival the "Decline and Fall" in bulk. Inside the

length of an SRL paper no more can be treated than one subdivision of one chapter, the one concerned with the undergraduate short story writer. This subdivision, though, has an especial interest of its own. More students experiment with short stories than with any other form except verse. And in recent years at least, the experimenters have found themselves on an exceptionally darkling plain, swept by even more than the normal number of confused alarms. Inside the college, there has been the conflict already referred to between the two kinds of instructors. Outside, opposing forces have been no less active—on the one hand, forces fairly represented by the *Saturday Evening Post*; on the other, by Edward O'Brien. These two have been powers for years in the shaping of student ambitions, but towards whichever one the beginner turns, he finds his path beset by pitfalls. If he turn towards the *Post*, his early stories are likely to be constructed brick by brick, incident set upon

incident, often with scanty mortar between. If he ally himself with the *Little Magazines*, he passes, lacking some special saving grace, into the ranks of the look-by-look writers. "John opened the door. He walked into the room. He turned and closed the door." The *Little Magazine's* demand, "Write what you see," has wrought probably as much havoc in college classes as has Poe's "single effect" or the legend of what figures stand written on Booth Tarkington's checks.

Which path a would-be writer is to choose is determined oftenest by his instructor. What an instructor demands he gets from any college group. There exist teachers of writing whose passage from one college to another is marked by

Next  Week

THE TYRANNY OF WORDS
By STUART CHASE
Reviewed by Crane Brinton

THE WILD GOOSE CHASE
By REX WARNER
Reviewed by Basil Davenport

changes in the college magazine as clearly as if by a red line on the map. When, however, an instructor chances to be a teacher, not a propagandist, and so leaves his class to its own devices, then the Little Magazines have usually a slight lead. But before the proponents of the Little Magazines begin rejoicing over this fact, they should recognize that the reasons for the lead are not all strictly literary. Two of them, indeed, are highly practical.

Everybody knows that the undergraduate's time sense is like no other. What happens before graduation looms enormous in his eyes. What is to happen afterwards is overshadowed to the point of invisibility. Even the most imaginative undergraduate can scarcely picture himself collecting Tarkington's checks in the earlier period; a Little Magazine, on the other hand, bombarded by manuscripts, may yield an acceptance and almost certainly will yield a letter or two of friendly comment from the editor. And in college as in Carmel, local reputation may be built on the polite rejection.

As for the second of the practical reasons, it, too, is related to time. Between midnight and breakfast, it is possible to produce a "John" story—cross-section, stream of consciousness, what you will—and lay it, all neatly typed, on the instructor's desk at class time. It is not possible to produce a story of cemented incident, no matter how badly cemented, within the same period. The breakfast bell finds you still struggling with how to get the hero from there to here. When the definitive history of writing classes does finally appear, both the *Post* and the Little Magazines will require a good deal of treatment, but the history will not be definitive if it leave out of account either of that pair of powerful directives.

But after these and other extraneous urges have been written off, it remains true that the visible influences in student fiction are influences ultra-modern. An undergraduate may devour Hardy, soak up George Moore, and yet scarcely a hint of either appear in his stories. What contemporary experimenter has caught his fancy is usually as plain to see as though the titles were typed in his margins. And when an instructor, with a dozen stories in front of him, has read the first three, he knows not only what three members of his class have been reading but what eight out of the remaining nine have been. Student writers are invariably gregarious. A new-found literary enthusiasm runs through a group of them like influenza.

Minor epidemics occur continually, but to date there seem to have been but four major ones—O. Henry, Conrad, Katherine Mansfield, Hemingway. Merely listing the names goes a long way towards showing what kind of writing produces imitation—as also what kind does not. In the years



CORRIDOR INSIDE QUADRANGLE, LELAND STANFORD UNIVERSITY

just before the war, as many literary minded undergraduates were reading H. G. Wells as O. Henry. Certainly Wells was more discussed among them. Yet neither Wells's forthright English nor his fantastic imagination produced any appreciable crop of Wellsian stories, while that student was but a poor thing who could not bring forth a passable O. Henry tale, all but the final paragraph.

Conrad is one of the few writers to have seized on student imagination and to have held it from Atlantic to Pacific by virtue of a single story. His earliest fiction drew almost no attention; "Youth" had not reached its second printing before two undergraduate writers out of three were going down to the sea in ships and trailing tripled adjectives on the un-English side of their nouns, "—the night, dark, sullen, silent," "—the wave, curved, gleaming, green." The instructor who did not learn early to nip out subject and predicate from the sentences of a Conrad enthusiast and so get on with the story was likely to find himself still reading in the small hours. The essence of Conrad—his unfrightened fatalism, his abstinence from pity—passed younger writers by. It was the roll of his sentences for which they loved him.

This was not the case with Katherine Mansfield nor yet with Hemingway, two writers who, far apart though they were, had effects curiously similar. The mannerisms of both were potent, of course. Shake any manuscript over the table the year after "The Killers" appeared, and the extra "he said's" rattled down like dice. Do the same to the story of some one just finishing "The Garden Party," and you had on your hands a basketful of stray metaphors. But with both Mansfield and Hemingway, attitude towards life was even more contagious than was manner. When, in however different accents, these two announced, "Life is brutal, faithless, bitter at the core," the announcement

woke an instant undergraduate response. Life is always bitter to the undergraduate—somebody else's life—and never more so than it was in the overprosperous '20's. After "Miss Brill" came spinsters innumerable, sitting on park benches, staring out of *pension* windows, hurrying home to make a piteous celebration out of the extra currant in the bun. After "The Killers," stories contemptuous of human life swept into fashion—and are in fashion still.

So far, no writer later than Hemingway has established an influence even to be compared with him. Individual stories—"A Telephone Call," "Good Wednesday," "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze"—have attracted their groups of admirers, but the effects have been short lived. For symmetry, and in justification of earlier literary experience, Hemingway's successor should be an exponent of the ordinary, an upholder of the more comfortable verities, but it would take a reckless prophet to declare that he will be. With the first of the "Home Place" stories a year or two ago, many college instructors must have looked up expectant, for the required contrasts were abundantly there. But though the first story excited some attention, the later ones did not, and the displacer of Hemingway is still to come.

Undergraduates have, of course, no monopoly on imitation. Everybody who writes imitates. In college classes, the imitations are merely picked out more easily than elsewhere because, like the members of Mrs. Ballanger's club, collegians necessarily pursue culture in bands. When they are not imitating, the writing of those with any modicum of talent is precisely like the writing of writers who are not in college. "Harvard Has a Homicide" may have produced a crop of tales with Harvard settings, but ordinarily out of a hundred college manuscripts passably

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A Middle Way for America

YOUR MONEY AND YOUR LIFE. A Manual for "the Middle Classes." By Gilbert Seldes. New York: Whittlesey House. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DAVID CUSHMAN COYLE

"IT is not good for a nation," says Mr. Seldes, "to have a great deal of its thinking done by the victims of an economic disaster, especially when the rest of the thinking is being done by those who are deliberately out to take an unfair advantage of the system under which we live." As he explains, those who can operate a profitable racket can afford to pay the keenest thinkers in the country to do their thinking for them; those who are totally dispossessed have nothing to lose and every incentive to think bitterly and constantly. But the middle class—those who are most likely to read this book—have got the habit of reading detective stories while the exploiters and the exploited fight for control of the nation. Unless the middle class people can wake up and take their own part, there is danger that they may find themselves squeezed out like the lost middle classes of Russia, Italy, and Germany.

Democracy is a fine, large word, useful in political oratory, but like patriotism it can easily become a refuge for scoundrels unless it is constantly interpreted in daily life so as to have a clear meaning. Only the middle class can interpret democracy, and only in those countries with a strong middle class has democracy been able to live through the storms of the past twenty years. This book is called "a manual for 'the middle classes.'" It is addressed to the twenty-seven million families in America that get less than \$15,000 a year, especially to those who have enough to be above the line of desperation and are therefore tempted to relax and hope for the best.

As distinguished from the reactionary, who believes that communist agitators should be shot, and the radical, who would like to "liquidate" the bourgeoisie, Mr. Seldes says flatly that only the liberal, who can tolerate every extreme without adopting any extreme, is the true defender of democratic freedom. Only the liberal can find an ideal that does not require centralized private control of all industry on one hand or centralized public planning of all industry on the other. Middle class people, or, more accurately, people in the middle income brackets, are liberal by instinct and by economic interest, but if they fail to think for themselves they will be swept into support of reactionary or radical theories. At present, as Mr. Seldes puts it, "ninety per cent of the thinking is against the interests of ninety per cent of the American people."

"Your Money and Your Life" is stimulating rather than nourishing, for the author has wisely refrained from trying to explain the economic system in detail, and has contented himself with referring to the many other sources of information available. He is interested in one vital point—to wake up the reader to the necessity of understanding national problems and taking action toward their solution. The chapters on specific political and economic questions should be taken as illustrative examples, intended to leave the reader wanting more knowledge and especially to leave him more inclined to discuss national problems with his neighbors.

For example, Mr. Seldes emphasizes the fact that the consumer is the real employer of labor, the real arbiter of business prosperity, and the real source of strength to the middle class. He is in favor of expanding the middle class by large accretions from below, for every addition to the lowest incomes raises the level of all incomes and enlarges the number who are above the poverty line. "One thing the rich cannot afford," he says, "is the poverty of the poor." No one, in fact, can afford the poverty of the poor.

At the same time, Mr. Seldes is aware of the necessity of limiting the waste of natural resources, even though a proper national thrift may set bounds to the more extravagant dreams of the "age of plenty." There is a middle way between our present system of unbridled waste plus widespread poverty, and a temporary utopia of unbridled waste without poverty. Middle class common sense is the most probable instrument for finding that middle way.

It is refreshing to read such a book as this. The fact is, this reviewer, having had his deadline suddenly moved up by

telegraph, had intended to do a good deal of skipping and found it couldn't be done. Liberalism, which is the core of American life, is coming back. We do not have to choose either fascism or communism, says Seldes, and there are many who will say the same.

David Cushman Coyle, author of "Brass Tacks" and "The Irrepressible Conflict" has just been awarded the first prize in the Harper's Magazine contest for the best article on "The American Way." See page 19 for biographical note on Gilbert Seldes.

Ethiopia to Spain

TWO WARS AND MORE TO COME.

By Herbert L. Matthews. New York: Carrick & Evans. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES A. THOMSON

THE brilliant and daring correspondent of the *New York Times* has heartily enjoyed his "two wars," in Ethiopia and in Spain. He admits the horrors of modern battle, yet makes no bones about the thrill and pleasure which come to him. "War may be hell for everybody else," he writes, "but it is sometimes Heaven for a correspondent." Matthews has a natural relish for risk and danger, and this volume is in large part a story of personal adventure. His own experiences serve as the link in the book between the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the war in Spain. But he argues that the two conflicts are joined in a more fundamental way. "Rome sets out to conquer a new Empire in Africa. To keep that Empire she must control the Mediterranean, but to do that she must have a dominating grip on the Balearics, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Spanish Peninsula. If that is to be accomplished Franco must win the Spanish Civil War, and since he cannot win it himself, Italy, with or without her ally Germany, must win it for him."

In Ethiopia Matthews was with the Italians. He was one of the two corre-



HERBERT L. MATTHEWS IN MADRID