

# THE WELLESLEY INCIDENT

## *A Case of Obscenity*

By THOMAS J. COTTLE

ON May 31, 1968, Wellesley Senior High School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, devoted half of the day to studying racism in America. There were panel discussions, movies, speeches, dramatic productions. My own role was to participate in a panel discussion with students. Upon entering the school, I encountered a rather powerful looking man. He stood at the head of a corridor, somewhat in darkness, his arms folded across his body in an almost self-comforting posture. He looked at me, shook his head side to side, and uttered one word, "smut." I smiled, a bit terrified. What had he seen? What had he heard?

What he had seen and heard had taken place in the gymnasium where bleachers were set up on both sides of the basketball floor. Students occupied one set, that facing the entrance. Several of us stood at the entrance, viewing the backs of actors playing to an absolutely spellbound young audience. Four actors presenting segments of plays, poems, even a dramatization of a sociological study, had the audience enthralled. They were so enthralled that at one point, in a scene from *Marat/Sade*, in response to an actor's plea for people to stand up for their rights, a group of black students did exactly that. They stood up, looked about sheepishly, and sat down. No one laughed.

Throughout the performance, the faces of the students told the real story. They were utterly involved and swept up in the fire of black and white dramatists, poets, and actors. They laughed at times, literally squealed with excitement at other times. They were angry and frightened, perplexed and relieved. School was good. And I thought that if it takes a Kerner Report and the assassination of a great man, well then, that's what it takes.

When the play ended, the students exploded with applause. They leaped out of their seats, many wanting to get close to the actors, perhaps even to touch one.

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Their spirit was just as vibrant during the panel discussion. They argued, listened, argued some more. They were polite, but a political restlessness could be felt in their rhetoric. They wanted in. They weren't self-conscious about their status. They wanted a piece of the action.

The blacks especially reacted as though some systemic emergency brake had been released, and they lurched forward. Were the students speaking publicly about race for the first time? Was this actually the first real forum on race in this high school, which received busloads of Boston blacks each day? They were talking now.

Outside the gym in the concrete and brick corridors of the school, the atmosphere was electric. One could only envy the teachers who would confront those wonderful mobs after lunch. Wellesley Senior High School had taken a courageous step. I took back all I had felt about suburban high schools. They had their problems but they did the best they could. The school had been turned on and, indeed, it stayed turned on for the rest of that special, special day. Several teachers, however, upset by the dramatic presentation, had stomped out of the gym before its completion. They felt that the language was obscene and inappropriate for children. But in the main, all seemed fine. Sadly enough for the students, classes would carry on and "normal" curriculum would resume for the last few weeks of the term.

But the people of Wellesley had other ideas. The fire of the theatrical production and especially the language of Le-Roi Jones's *The Slave* had ignited the town. A school committee meeting the following Monday brought heated discussion, but reports still indicated that the majority of those in attendance supported the program—movies, panels, Le-Roi Jones, and all. A few cried obscene, but a Wellesley College philosopher had cited that poverty, racism, and Vietnam were America's genuine obscenities. Most significantly, hearing only secondary reports, the superintendent of schools publicly supported the entire program.

All at once, the *Wellesley Townsman*



Photos from a re-enactment of "The Wellesley Incident" on WGBH-TV, with responses from parents, teachers, and students. . . .



One teacher noted: "There is a curious difference between the teenagers' reaction and ours. . . ."



"... Our conversation has been about those words. Their conversation was about the issues that were raised."



became essential reading matter. Letters to the editor came in from the left, right, and most oblique center. Parents and teachers wrote of scandal and horror as well as of a community reawakening. Some questioned how the program could have been approved, others how it could have been so long in coming. Two resident families known for their liberal activities invited the theatrical company to perform *The Slave* again in a public place such as the library. The town selectmen voted no, feeling it would only cause unnecessary trouble. *The Townsman* also reported that one parent had contacted the local district attorney's office. Criminal complaints were to be sought. There would be investigations, a court case, and perhaps prison sentences. The Wellesley Incident was born.

**T**HAT night Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Like so many, we commenced our television vigil disbelievingly. Wellesley, too, had heard the news from California, but *The Slave* incident took precedence. People talked, police investigated, and before Kennedy's body had been transferred to St. Patrick's, five people were notified that applications for criminal complaints had been filed. They were to appear in court the following Tuesday for a show-cause hearing. The charge was introducing an obscene and indecent play to minors in a place of education. In Massachusetts, the penalty for this crime is five years imprisonment and \$5,000 fine.

The five were two teachers, the drama company's producer, the director of the company's actors, and the chairman of the Wellesley Committee to End Racism,

the group incurring the company's expenses at the high school. Established in response to the Martin Luther King assassination, the committee had openly supported the Friday morning programs.

By now, the community was split on the issue, although not down the middle. The majority of Wellesley parents and teachers stood opposed to the theatrical production even, apparently, to the extent that criminal charges were felt to be appropriate. A majority of the students indicated support. Their backing was not that loud, but loud enough to demonstrate that social and political attitudes now separate the generations by entire lifetimes.

There is a totally helpless feeling that comes over people when they become implicated in events like this. So it was on that Sunday and Monday. The accused received no news from the town of Wellesley except an announcement that an open school committee meeting would be held the Monday evening before the court hearing so that feelings might be aired.

On Monday night it rained. When we arrived at the school auditorium only two people were present. A man sat across the aisle from us. He sat sternly erect and perfectly silent. Then he turned to the woman, the only other person in this large hall, and said something about their having gone too far this time and that they had to be stopped. She agreed.

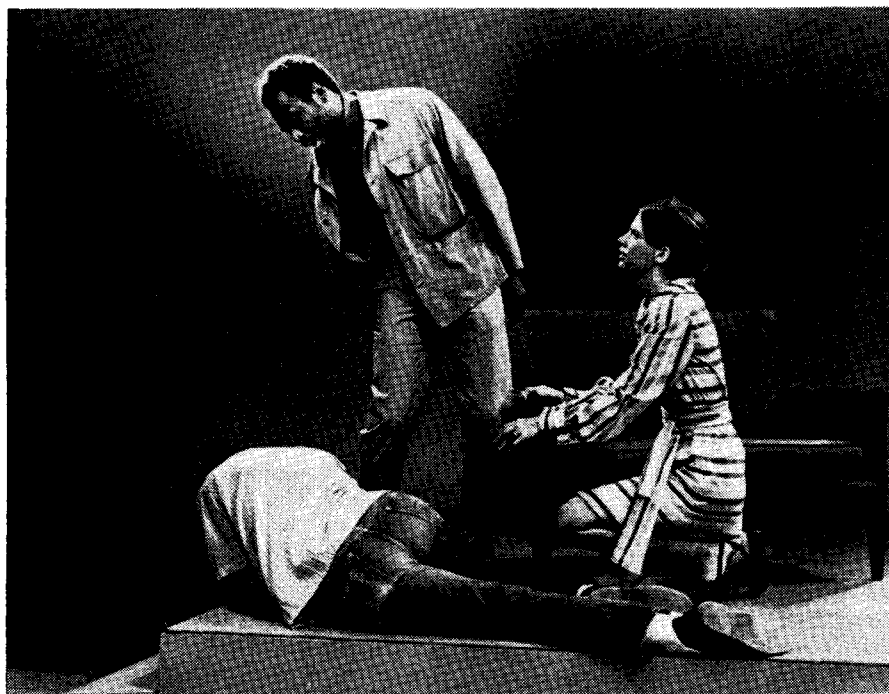
After long moments of silence, the auditorium began to fill. Students rushed to sit in front. They would have camped on the floor had they been allowed. They poured down the aisles, some dressed as hippies. This took special courage

that particular night, but many young people don't compromise themselves. Television reporters, too, strutted about wishing to be observed. Aisles were kept empty but along the perimeter of the auditorium and in the exits, parents and teachers were everywhere. It was jammed. The noise swelled, then suddenly diminished as TV lights splashed on the stage where the Wellesley School Committee, led by the superintendent of schools, paraded single file from stage left. One woman sits on this committee and serves as its chairman.

The exciting although anxious proceedings of that Monday night meeting might best be described as a rather grotesque fugue, its inner voices audible only to those sufficiently aware politically to listen for them. *The Slave* contains words some had felt to be obscene. In the particular performance in question, it also contained a scene in which a black man leans over a seated white woman, nuzzles her a bit as she resists, and according to the actor who did it, gives her a small kiss on the side of the neck. In the drama, the two are former marriage partners and the parents of two children. This scene became known as the "chase and rape" scene. The so-called obscene word became known simply as *The Word*.

Along with segments of other works carefully selected and integrated into a continuous performance depicting black feelings and philosophies over the last twenty years, *The Slave* was presented on the gymnasium floor of a white, upper-class Boston suburban high school. About twelve black families live in this community. Three years ago, Boston's Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunities (METCO) program tried to gain permission to bus twenty-five black students from the Roxbury district into Wellesley Senior High School, a school of some 1,300 pupils. There was, at the time, some protest. Convening to oppose the METCO proposal, a small group calling themselves Operation Abolition METCO had instituted a town vote. However, a sizable majority of the 10 per cent of the voters going to the polls voiced their acceptance of METCO. After this rather difficult go, Wellesley had consented, and in the fall of 1966, twenty-five blacks rolled in each day, hung around the METCO office, went to class, hung around the METCO office, and were bused home. There was tension, but mostly a distressing bewilderment. Many white students confessed desires to be helpful and large numbers of Wellesley homes opened their doors to blacks. Some students dated in Wellesley or spent weekends in Wellesley homes.

Accepting even those few blacks was no mean accomplishment. As recently as  
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A scene from *The Slave*—"Was this actually the first real forum on race in this high school, which received busloads of Boston blacks each day?"



# Voices in the Classroom

Wallace Roberts

## Unrest in the Academy

*"When something starts to happen, groove with it; don't just sit there. You're not the audience; you're the oppressed. You're oppressed by the Modern Language Association."*

THE SPEAKER was an intense young thing, dressed in bell-bottom slacks and a lumberjack shirt. Her audience consisted of several hundred members of the professional association for college teachers of language and literature gathered at a "radical caucus" the evening before the annual meeting of the MLA in New York just before Christmas. Her statement was accepted without objection, almost as if the oppressive effects of the policies were as obvious as Moby Dick's coloration. They are and they aren't. The MLA exists, like the American Historical Association, the American Sociological Association, and similar groups, to provide opportunities for its members to exchange ideas and job offers. However, it is also a tacit monopoly guarding the primary access road to careers in the academy, and if one wishes to become a professor of English or history, one must meet a set of informal, but in one sense restrictive, standards set through consensus by the members of the discipline. The standards are intended to weed out the hacks and incompetents, and in many cases the process works. Nevertheless, the standards can be used—either consciously or unconsciously—to define what are appropriate fields of inquiry and ways of studying them.

The radical caucus at the MLA meeting is one of several current indications that there is a growing number of professors and graduate students who want to have certain subjects and methodologies recognized as valid. They feel that these areas and methods of investigation are more directly connected to current social issues, such as poverty, urban decay, population explosion—food shortage, race relations, and the whole host of dangers that some see for a society dominated by technology and electronics.

At the Christmas meeting of the MLA, the actions of the radicals took several different forms. After hours of sometimes harsh debate during the final business meeting, resolutions were passed condemning the war in Vietnam, the draft, the choice of Chicago as next year's meeting site, and what some see as the use of the law to harass writers like LeRoi Jones and Eldridge Cleaver.

Louis Kampf, chairman of the humanities department at MIT and a leader of the radicals, was, along with two colleagues, arrested in the lobby of the Hotel Americana for trying to prevent the police from tearing down a poster that used a quotation from William Blake to protest academic apathy parading as dispassion ("The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction"); three days later, Kampf was elected second vice president of the MLA, which means he is to become its president in 1970.

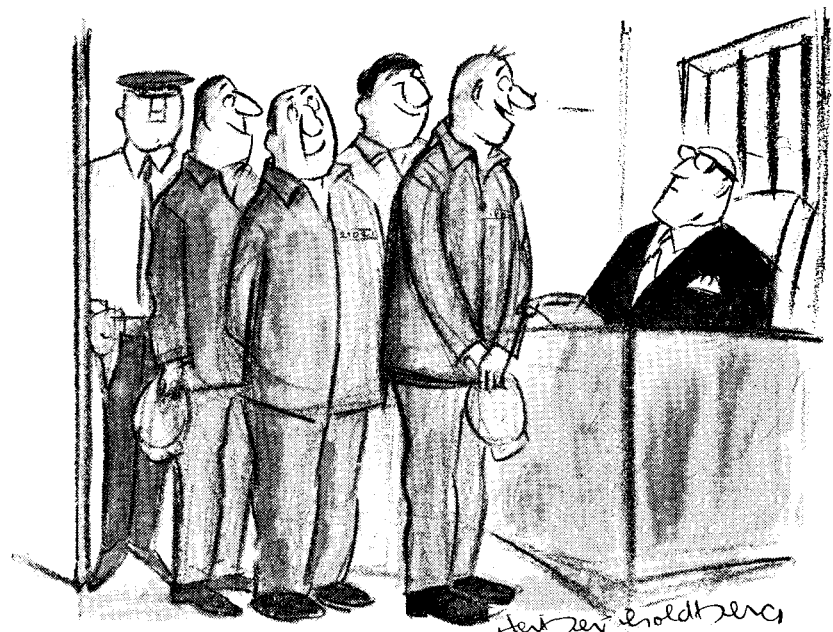
The MLA meeting was not unlike recent meetings of similar organizations in other disciplines at which there have been attempts to bring to the main body of the professoriate the political and professional concerns of some members. Since last fall, the sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and historians have been confronted with the question of the extent to which the academic disciplines could express concern with current social issues and the extent to which they should modify their disciplines to meet the needs presented by massive social change.

This unrest appears to stem from two sources, one of which is that the students of the Sixties are growing up and some of them, as instructors and assistant professors, are raising the same kinds of questions about education and social issues that they raised as students. The New University Conference, a loose co-

alition of faculty members, teaching assistants, and graduate students—most of them young and many of them former SDS members—was formed several months ago and is now operating with autonomous chapters on about twenty-five campuses. There are similar groups in several disciplines, such as the American Psychologists for Social Action, and there are more informal arrangements, such as a one-day boycott of research work scheduled for March 4 at MIT and several other campuses to protest alleged misuses of scientific and technical knowledge.

Another part of the problem seems to stem from a growing sense of many Americans, including some of the older professors, that the magnitude of some of society's problems is greater than was imagined five or ten years ago. In the disciplines, this sense is translated into a feeling that the *ultimate* relevance sought by the dispassionate scholar should no longer be the sole concern, that at least as important are more immediate questions. The feeling is that "we don't have time to wait until all the data are in," and that we have to deal with certain pressing problems with the best information we have.

What all this comes to, I think, at least for the academic disciplines, is not whether any particular assessment of the times or of the state of the disciplines is correct; some people believe these assessments and will act on that basis. The obligation of the radicals is to make their attempts at new forms of inquiry as rigorous and as self-critical as possible. Our obligation, it seems, is to recognize that there may be other equally valid ways of putting ideas and knowledge to work.



*"So in view of your enlightened approach to the penal code, we thought you might share our recommendation for a co-ed prison."*