



Why All Students Should Study English Literature

by Jean R. Timmins

Each year the university lecture halls are filled with a new crop of students, many of them straight from high school, and all of them unsure in this new learning environment. Up to this time they have been taught facts so that they can pass examinations. But now they must learn *to think* for themselves, to evaluate and analyse the material offered in their various courses. Many students flounder through their first year because their previous schooling has not equipped them to read with comprehension or to record their thoughts with clarity and accuracy. These two abilities are essential to the successful completion of any course, whether it be in the physical sciences or the arts, and until students acquire these abilities, they will continue to flounder. If all students, whatever their career goal, were required to study English literature as part of their first year, they would benefit by developing the two basic

skills, and by broadening their perception and appreciation of the world around them.

To a budding engineer, the study of English literature may seem a waste of valuable time. But as he becomes involved in the course and is asked to analyse and criticise literary works, he will find that he is reading with more understanding; as he struggles to write papers on this or that subject, he will find that his knowledge and use of language is improving. He may even find that there is a certain common ground between engineering and good literature. A good writer must use words with precision; he must construct sentences with balance; and he must have a concept that will bind his whole work into a solid structure. A mathematical mind appreciates precision, balance and unity, and as our engineering student comes to see the importance of these factors in the art of literature, he will no longer think of his study of

English literature as a waste of time. In practical terms, he will read his engineering text-books with greater comprehension and he will write his reports with precise language and good sentence structure.

The practical application of skills learned in an English course is obvious. The ability to read with understanding and write with clarity and precision will be useful to all students, even beyond their university years. Less obvious, but perhaps more important, is the influence upon the students of the literary works they will be required to study. Most have arrived on campus with a set of values picked up from home and school, but they have had little opportunity to test the truth of these values; to discover whether or not their values are based on prejudice. They have yet to learn that 'different' does not necessarily mean 'dreadful'. In their English course they will be confronted with a wide range of opinion that will force them to consider the validity of their presently held beliefs. In the process, they will learn tolerance of opinions not their own, and appreciation of the variety inherent in the human race.

The ability to appreciate different points of view is only one of the advantages to be gained from analysing and comparing literary works. In our electronic age the air is full of words—informing, describing, pleading, exhorting—about every manner of cause or kind of product. The critical faculty that the students develop in their study of English will help them steer a course through this flood of verbiage. In the narrow sense, they will be less likely to succumb to the blandishments of the advertising agencies, and so become more intelligent consumers in their day-to-day lives. That, however, is the lesser benefit. George Orwell, in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, said that political writing was bad writing and that it was designed to deceive. It is essential, if we are to have good government, that the electorate should be well informed—an impossible proposal, it would seem, given the fact of deceptive political writing. Here again, the habit of critical reading developed by the students in an English course will come to their aid when they are faced with a politician's rhetoric, or with the advocacy advertising so often used by our governments. They will be better equipped to evaluate the rhetoric, recognize the falsity in the advertising, and make intelligent decisions on political questions. This is a small, but vital step towards an informed electorate.

The benefits of studying English literature are usually confined to those students who are actually enrolled in the course. Just occasionally, however, they may have a wider significance. In the magazine *Alberta Report*, dated September 19, 1980, an article "Wiebe's Fables" relates some of the details of Mr. Rudy Wiebe's career. In his early years, his enrolment in a junior English course influenced him to switch from pre-med to an arts program at the University of Alberta. As a result, Western Canada gained an historical novelist of note, and a teacher who continues to influence young writers. Admittedly, such an occurrence is rare, but the possibility remains that some latent power will be sparked into life and that some hitherto inarticulate student will find a voice. Such a possibility must be added to the account when assessing the total benefits of a course in English.

C. P. Snow, in his lecture *The Two Cultures* deplored the lack of understanding between literary intellectuals and scientists. He considered this gulf to be one of the greatest obstacles to real creativity and original thought. The gulf which he saw in the 1950s still exists in spite of efforts to bridge it, such as Dr. Suzuki's television program, *The Nature of Things*. These efforts must be maintained if the gulf is to be narrowed. To require all students to take a course in English literature will not instantly close the gap between the two groups. It will not produce a generation, all wise and all good. But it will open the minds of students to new ideas, giving them an opportunity to build across the gap and to accept both the scientific and the literary viewpoint.

It is evident, then, that there are two areas in which the study of English literature is advantageous. The first is the strictly personal. Here, each student having completed the course, will find that his ability to read critically and to write effectively has improved. These two skills will stand him in good stead in all other courses he may take. The second area of advantage is much broader, taking into account the effect these students will eventually have on the rest of society. Each student will have a mind more tolerant, more aware of the falsities to be found in the media, and more able to put present-day problems into historical perspective. These are excellent weapons with which to enter the never-ending battle for truth in the market-place and on the hustings. Students, armed with such weapons, will be useful and forceful additions to society.