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Proposal for an investigation into the
literary background of students at a
Victorian High School.

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As language is one of the most important of man's instruments for understanding the world around him, it should be one of the aims of any study of language to ~~refine~~ develop our command of this instrument. This command is developed both by practising its use in our own speaking and writing, and possibly learning some rules to guide us, and by studying the way others have used it in works of literature. Although these two activities cannot be separated either from each other ~~nor~~ from many other parts of learning and working in which the same skills are used, for convenience we can label the first practice ~~English~~ Expression and the second Literature. It is with the second of these that I am concerned.

It is a pleasant but ultimately profitless task to define literature. For the purposes of this study, I ~~pragmatically~~ understand it as the work which results when ~~now~~ a man ^{succeeds in putting} ~~expresses~~ into words his understanding of any part of his experience. In considering the literary background or environment of students, I am concerned not only with work which fits this description, but also with that which purports to ^{fit it} and which the student may take as actually doing so. Thus I am interested not only in a poem by Wilfred Owen which the student may encounter in class, where the poet tries to find words to define his experience of the Great War, but also with the

For each of these experiences makes a difference to the child's understanding of the language and thus to his perception of the world about him. The actual content of both poem and comic may be soon forgotten, but words acquire their meaning only by their use, and everything we read or hear makes some contribution to ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the significance we place on various words and phrases. If the study of literature has a value beyond the immediate enjoyment of reading the selected works and the significance of each particular experience to the child, then this value lies in the extension of our perception and the development of our awareness and sensitivity, through ~~the progressive refinement of our understanding of~~ ^{understanding of} our language. Thus, the ultimate distinction between the two works I have cited is made not by reference to any observable facts in France or Vietnam, but by attention to the use of language in each.¹

but In order to understand ~~either~~ the way in which language mediates between us and our experience ~~either the way in which we understand the way in which language~~ we must look at the rôle literature plays at each stage of a child 's development. ² It should be realised that a child's own use of language will be developing parallel to and probably influenced by his reading or hearing of literature, but this ^{development} lies outside the scope of this essay. ³

At the earliest stage of his life, the child is possibly entertained by such apparent doggerel as "Bo peeper, Nose dreeper . . ." ⁴ which helps him define his physical identity. Even while the words are doubtfully comprehended, the sound and rhythm corresponds to the exploratory movements of the hands, directed probably by the mother. Later, the rimes express feelings, such as the joy of "Dance to your daddy," ⁵ or the security of lullabies, while the meaning of the words is still enforced by movement. As the child's comprehension grows, so does his curiosity and his fear as he confronts new and puzzling experiences or doubts. Now the songs dramatise the doubts, as well as providing simple solutions, necessary to his continued security:

"Here's Sulky Sue,
What shall we do?
Turn her face to the wall
Till she comes to."

The very real experience of naughtiness is turned to a joke, and so put into a form which the child can handle safely. "Old Mother Goose" deals dramatically with many of the problems of growing up. Jack is just an ordinary lad, "not very good, Nor ^{yet} very bad," but he grows through the stages of gaining independence (he is entrusted with the mission to market), learning the deceptiveness of the world (the merchant cheats him), love and courtship, and oppression (the squire and the merchant beat him). But he is still boy enough for Mother Goose to solve all problems by the use of her wand, and at the end of the poem she flies far above all the sordid creatures of the earth as a symbol of triumphant motherhood. Such poems

in ^hmay cases come from the far mythology of the race, and can be associated with the most intricate rimes of the fertility cults by which man tried to establish his place in the world of nature, but they also reflect much commonsense and down-to-earth observations of our fellow-men. There can be much debate about their precise mythological or psychological significance, but the essential thing from the literary point of view is that they use words and ~~images~~ the images suggested by these words to assist the child to place himself in his environment, to prepare him for troubles to come, and to understand the truth of his common humanity. No poem will have precisely the same significance to any two hearers, but each will use it for his own purposes or emotional needs. Nevertheless, the fact that the words are the same for all means that the various readers are sharing a common experience, and, as individuals, are learning that their own experience and perception is not unique. They are, in other words, acquiring a common culture or frame of reference within which to work out their own lives.

Death, fear, loneliness, ~~and~~ love, and aggression all have a part in these songs, ~~which~~ but the child's feelings are dramatised rhythmically, and so made manageable, in the third person, and thus made bearable, and in the context of an outside world where an outside power can always rescue him from the worst of his troubles. Thus they protect his security while preparing him for the time when he must leave it. In this way, literature gives a concrete form to our feelings, enabling us to cope with them, at the same time as it initiates us into the

fellowship of humanity by bringing us to the understanding that our predicament has been shared by everyone who has ever lived. Similarly, this shared experience gives us a common frame of reference through which we communicate with other people.

At a later stage, literature moves away from our immediate experience and explores all the possibilities of life. The world of fiction is bounded neither by time nor place, and when ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the child first approaches it he will probably enjoy the most far-ranging tales of action and adventure. After he has left the nursery behind, he will probably move through tales of animals and other gentle and tractable creatures who reflect human qualities ^{until he is ready for} ~~is the wild~~ adventures of the western prairies or the Spanish Main. He progresses ~~at~~ stage in his self-awareness, just as historically civilization progressed from the Odyssey, where Athena's timely interference brings the hero's troubles to a conclusion, to the works of Euripides, where the gods act according to caprice, and the individual man has to make his best way on his own. Similarly, in such a work as "Kidnapped," probably enjoyed by boys just before adolescence, the hero has a stout companion to help him, but ~~the~~ David's ultimate decisions are his own responsibility (and it is David with whom the reader is encouraged to identify). Before or while reaching this stage, the child has probably enjoyed the successful villainy of Brer Rabbit, the common-sense which unfailingly guides Alice through the most improbable circumstances, or the gusto which enables Mr. Toad to overcome the rascally usurpers, not to mention the forces of good order and respectability.

The thing to note about this children's literature is that through it the child gains an understanding of the variety of human character and human conduct, and so is able to build up his own moral universe. Although he encounters a bewildering array of ~~his~~ possible human experience, he is however still secured by the knowledge that good will finally triumph if it is persistent enough. Only later will he be ready for works which question this easy assumption, or for works which even question the existence of such values as good and evil. But when eventually he does come to such works, he is going to have a context within which to place them as he ~~xxxxxxx~~ has already been forced to encounter these moral problems and moral choices in works which treat them honestly but at his level of comprehension and maturity. For the other point to be noted about a child's reading is that he naturally turns to stories of experiences which he has still to meet in real life.

As the child passes through adolescence, he ~~xxxxxxx~~ ~~xxx~~ starts to encounter adult literature. This is characterised by its shedding of the props of fantasy and escapism which have helped the reader in his early years. Now he will want to face honestly to life, to shed his illusions and to find the truth. But there will be many books which make only a pretence of this, which display a tough exterior as apparent proof of their realism but are built around a soft and finally false and sentimental core which makes them easily digestible but seriously misleading. One of the functions of literature teaching must be to enable the student to recognise this false fare which is designed to ~~xxxxxxx~~

stunt the reader's mental and emotional growth by leading him away from reality into a ~~xxxx~~ temporarily satisfying dream world which must prove ultimately barren.

It is my intention to look at the actual literary influences encountered by students at Kyabram High School from this point of view, to collect responses from the students to what they read and hear and ~~x~~ see, and to analyse this material according to its literary quality. By this I mean the honesty with which the work presents human ~~pxe~~ experiences and faces up to human problems, and the significance of the literary form in showing a moral pattern. The students' responses should show with what maturity they are able to respond to the material presented to them. I hope that the study will show the picture of ~~xxxxxxx~~ human life which is being presented to students in one Victorian high school by the literature they encounter in and out of school, and ~~ixx~~ the contribution it offers to their emotional growth.

NOTES

Donne

1. ~~xxx~~ A valid judgement of this particular comic could be made merely by glancing at the illustrations, but it is not logically necessary that the pictures and the words should be of the same standard. My concern is with the view of life being offered in the words.
2. I am not arguing that literature is the sole or even a necessary influence, but it is a probably influence and the one which is the concern of the English teacher.
3. For a discussion of a child's development as shown in his own use of language, see Kornei Chukovsky, "From Two to Five," translated by Miriam Morton, Australian edition from Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1963.
4. Quotations from the Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book, assembled by Iona and Peter Opie, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1955. Corrected edition, 1960.

2 ^{Victorian} p 332 Local Govt. Act,

3 Owen - Anthem for 1903
 Doomed Youth, p. 80, The Poems of
 Wilfred Owen, Charles Wicks,
 London, 1952