

## Gone Missing

by Elwood Holm

Something strange has happened in English departments at community colleges. First there was a refusal to address the reading and writing problems brought to these colleges by anyone other than literature teachers. Now there is a refusal to use literature to provide foundations for the skills of reading, writing, and thinking.

Literature is being rejected as a means by which community college students (particularly those with an urban public school education) can gain an understanding of their lives, the society in which they live, and the other societies which comprise the world. This dismissal is accompanied by the snobbery of a liberally educated elite which can take two forms, neither of which is overtly avowed. Either Literature is an adornment in which only the wealthy and leisured can indulge and from which only they can benefit, or it is a metaphor for class and is not to be accessed by a class lower on the socioeconomic ladder than the one from which the teacher originated. There is also a more overt assertion (in part intended to cover these covert beliefs) that the working class, lower class, and underclass cannot benefit from literature because it (a) describes societies to which they cannot relate, (b) deals with ideas that do not and cannot apply to their lives, (c) is innately too alien or too difficult for them to read, and (d) is simply not relevant to anything.

These anti-Literature contentions have at their core the ideological purpose of creating an accepting population. The explanation offered for withholding Literature is that the contemporary world is totally unique and therefore has no relation to the past or to the ways of understanding embraced in the past. Understanding comes only from direct experience as interpreted by a leadership that uses ideology to form "correct" explanations, much as earlier generations saw Literature as a source for explanation.

The withholding of Literature is comparable to the withholding of History; and in both cases, when they are presented, it is in a context carefully constructed to present "correct" explanations derived from the relevant ideology. In fact, withholding Literature becomes a form of unrecognized censorship in order to avoid conflicting views or views that are inconsistent with today's political correctness (therefore *Huckleberry Finn* is not to be taught, and since it is not taught, there is no need for the teacher to read it). This ideology proclaims that public education must be functional; and according to the ideology of those who control education, the mass media, and liberal-leftist political circles, functionality is the ability to manage and understand what is directly encountered on a "real life" basis.

The typical urban community college student was identified as a non-candidate for liberal arts education no later than the first year of high school without ever being told that. Instead, functionality was the underlying basis for his or her schooling. That nothing more could be given is blamed upon parental character, dysfunctional families, social upheaval, poverty, racism, personal deficiency, different brain structure, or a host of other

reasons—any of which may actually be present and needs to be overcome. But rather than seeing these as problems to be solved, they are typically treated as unsolvable by community college teachers and by the college itself. Therefore a curriculum is designed without Literature and History as essential components; this curriculum, while leaving the problem in place, alleges to avoid the problem by dealing only with students' existing overt abilities and knowledge base. This has the additional advantage of opening the role of educator to those who have themselves received such an education, without requiring them to attain a significantly different level or scope of knowledge than the students they teach. The teacher thus becomes one with the students and with the ideology that created this situation. In other words, the teacher does not have to know Literature because Literature is no more relevant for the teacher than it is for the students.

So what the hell does it matter if teachers and students don't know literature any more than they know formal grammar and syntax? What they comfortably know is no different than being comfortable speaking. Whether these students (and their teachers) can function satisfactorily within their environment is what matters. Literature, like History, is an idle luxury which does not produce anything functional within that environment. So why get your knickers in a knot over whether Johnny or Jane or their teacher can read and discuss Literature? They don't need it where they are.