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Reading Comprehension

Let's return now to particular ideological stands in the objections. One of these concerned militarism. Coming out shortly after the end of the Vietnam conflict, the Kanawha textbook programs contained a great deal of material produced by that war, especially about incidents raising moral issues, like the massacre of civilians at My Lai. Questioning of the reasons for American presence in Vietnam, conscientious objection, and reportage on military misconduct were routinely condemned.

An *Interaction* book for senior high school called *Transcripts* contained an interview from the *Evergreen Review* with five veterans who had taken part in the My Lai episode. With unusual understatement an objector merely wrote, "Not necessary for education." Similar material in another book called *Transcripts* for lesser advanced secondary students consisted of short excerpts from the trial of Lt. Calley, the officer immediately in charge at My Lai, and from an interview CBS newsman Mike Wallace did with paul Meadlo, who admitted to killing a number of civilians and who gave an account interesting to compare with the one his officers gave, as recorded in the transcript of the trail. The Kanawha reviewer said,

> The remainder of this book is filled with the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti and of Lt. Calley, and with interviews with Paul Meadlow [*sic*] and Capt. Medina. I question why this type of literature is important for students unless it is to make them feel guilt and shame.

(Captain Medina appeared as a witness during the trial, not in an interview.) These Vietnam selections occupied one-tenth of the book totaling 120 pages and including also three sports selections, interviews by folklorist Alan Lomax and oral historian Studs Terkel, a radiocast of the explosion of the *Hindenburg*, some humorous debate from the *Congressional Record*, and a couple of other nonideological selections.

Consider the implications of lumping together the My Lai selections with the excerpt from the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. Both may be re-

garded as challenging authority or criticizing the government. If the trial was unjust or My Lai immoral – or Vietnam unjustified – then such selections would point to derelictions on the part of America or some parts of "our way of life." Self-scrutiny is among the biggest taboos of the mystique we are examining. "Hawks" eager to renew the war on Communism say that we no longer have to hang our heads and inhibit our policies because of some lingering guilt about Vietnam (as if moral self-examination had been a sick phase). Students nearing the voting age need to think about the actions of governments.

Interestingly, the objector does not challenge the veracity of these selections. One of the virtues of verbatim transcripts is that they constitute a kind of hard facts, on the one hand, being recorded verbal events, and stand clearly, on the other hand, as the views and experiences of those who utter them, devoid of authorial commentary or presentation. For this reason we regarded transcripts as a fine medium for engaging students with certain controversial subjects as well as with an important mode of discourse covering interview, trial, debate, newscast, panel, etc. Referring to this raw, dialogical mode as "literature" may be a subtle effort to offset the realism of these selections, which forced the objections into a subdued vein.

Although we as editors could create bias by collaging snippets or selecting a passage in which one party develops a view to the exclusion of his adversaries, the fact is that these My Lai selections might well arouse sympathy for the killers as well as the killed, because one effect of a transcript can be to capture, through its spontaneity, some of the truth beyond the individuals speaking. Who cannot be moved, for example, on hearing Lt. Calley say, in his statement after being convicted of premeditated murder:

> When my troops were getting massacred and mauled by an enemy I couldn't see, I couldn't feel and I couldn't touch – that nobody in the military system ever described them as anything other than Communism.
>
> They didn't give it a race, they didn't give it a sex, they didn't give it an age. They never let me believe it was just a philosophy in a man's mind. That was my enemy out there.
>
> And when it became between me and that enemy, I had to value the lives of my troops – and I feel that was the only crime I have committed.[1]

His crime of ordering the massacre of civilian men, women, and children may not be so great as that of leaders who put him in this hopelessly ambiguous situation. His government had told him the enemy was "Communism," but they also told him it was these people "out there" in front of him. But which ones? Some are supposed to have a certain bad "philoso-

phy" in their heads and some not. The ones you are supposed to be defending against Communism look exactly like those who killed your buddies yesterday. They're all called "gooks," which surely means subhuman animals. Since the real effect was to kill a huge number of "gooks," perhaps it's naïve to talk of ideological conflict; perhaps Vietnam was just another race war. The Them-and-Us square-off between capitalism and Communism shifted over into the Them-and-Us of white vs. yellow, or American vs. Asiatic. (Remember Pearl Harbor!)

In another *Interaction* transcript that did give voice to only one view, the voice was that of a judge explaining to a Vietnam draft evader why, despite his respect for the defendant's sincerity and good character, he was sentencing him to prison, according to the law in cases where a person has refused even to file formally as a conscientious objector. Like Calley's post-trial statement, this one too opens up a bigger perspective than either of the opposed views. Kanawha reviewers made no comment on this selection, even though the draft evader was much praised by the judge. His rare ability to sentence and praise at the same time stymied, I believe, their customary mode of reacting.

Here is the objection, however, to a one-inch column ad by an organization offering advisory service to conscientious objectors, which appeared among dozens of selections in the booklet titled *Advertisements* (the only such book in the program, by the way), surrounded, in a kind of amusing juxtaposition, by ads for pistols, burglary locks, Charles Atlas muscle-building, and several others reflecting America's heterogeneity.

> *Objection:* Given the current context of controversy concerning the avoidance of military service for a variety of dubiously contrived excuses, this advertisement is a "natural" pedogogical [*sic*] springboard for the advocacy of radical ideology concerning hatred for the military and justification for rationalizing cowardice and other alledgedly [*sic*] "conscientious" reasons for avoiding one's obligation to serve his country, when called upon to do so.

Fortunately, *this* objection was not so understated as to prevent our getting a good look at what's bothering the dissenters.

A book in the *Man* series contained an article in which the statement is made, "What is absurd and monstrous about war is that men who have no personal quarrel should be trained to murder one another in cold blood." The objection read: "Killing in war is not murder. Defending one's nation is not choosing war any more than killing in defense of one's home and family is choosing murder." It is assumed that any war is in defense of the homeland, which is of course the impression instigators of war always take pains to create. Feeling obliged to apologize for war in general is symptomatic of the militaristic attitude, where war becomes an

equivalent of patriotism and group loyalty, to the point that pacifism means just the opposite, dislike of one's country and disloyalty. Thus for the dissenters it was self-explanatory to object to a selection as pacifist, because this was their synonym for traitors and cowards.

For example, in the secondary school book *Fables*, a retelling in modern dress by Lenny Jenkins of Aesop's "Birds, Beasts, and Bat" was rejected with this sole remark: "This moral could appear to be a pacifist view if expanded." Actually, the fable in this case does not at all draw a pacifist moral, though I would think it perfectly all right if it did. I point this out because it shows a characteristic tendency in these objections to read into selections the ideas the reviewers are prepared to defend against.

The moral that the author concluded his fable with was, "If you try to sit on two chairs at once, you'll end up on the floor between them." This moral expresses logically and straightforwardly what the preceding action suggests. When a hawk and a bear quarreled over a fish, they set off a full-scale war between the birds and the beasts. Bat says, "I'll see which side looks like it'll come out on top, and join that one." The author says, "He knew that with his leathery wings he could easily pass for a bird, and with his ears and claws he could pass for a beast." Bat fights on one side at times and the other at other times, reversing for each occasion a special uniform he had made showing bird and beast on opposite sides. After the war is over, both sides reject him because he fought for the other. Ever since, Bat sneaks around at night and lives a confused, unhappy life. "Nobody knows exactly what kind of creature he is, and nobody cares," ends the story.[2]

It never occurred to me that this fable had anything to do with pacifism or militarism. It is about being two-faced to the point of losing identity. Have our objectors made a simple equation between a turncoat and a pacifist? Or are they playing with texts as pretexts for inflaming themselves?

It is time we shifted the focus of this examination from ideology to reading comprehension, though it will remain difficult to tell issues of one from those of the other. Objections presented so far have featured differences in *values*, whereas now I would like to emphasize differences in *interpretations*. This distinction must ever remain imperfect, for one sees what one wants or fears, or fails to see what one cannot afford to see or dare to want. Nevertheless, the deliberate effort to separate the ideological conflicts based on different values from the comprehensional conflicts based on different interpretations helps to bring out, if nothing else, just how much we read things in and out of texts according to our previously acquired belief systems.

Censors tend notoriously to repudiate this variation in interpretation itself as being one of the forms of relativity that in fact they want to censor. Instead of having a stable, absolute meaning, they feel, then a text

can "mean any old thing you want it to" and hence become meaningless. I don't say that most texts *should* elicit different interpretations but simply that they often *do*. I will try to point out instances where the objectors have misinterpreted a text from the way I think the author intended it to be construed. I do this not to fault the Kanawha readers but to hold out the possibility that vehement disputes such as happened there may stem from real misunderstanding as much as from true differences in values. It sounds fatuous or sentimental to hold that all conflicts are really just some sort of misunderstanding, but it may well be that *at some level of analysis or depth of truth,* all conflicts do indeed hinge on misunderstandings, depending on how well we succeed in discovering the less obvious similarity among people as well as the blatant differences.

If some titles in the *Interaction* breakdown of reading matter tended, like *Memoir* or *Biography,* to bring out ethnic variation, other titles tended to create special thinking problems affecting reading comprehension. Thus the previously mentioned *Dialogues and Monologues* failed to get rave reviews among the objectors as much perhaps for the sophistication of the unusual sort of literary technique it featured as for the representation of black thought, style, and dialects. As I've indicated, all the selections in it, even the two cartoons, placed on display, as on stage, a created character not to be confused with the author.

They were meant to show students that many texts besides play scripts may be performed—poems, short stories, and eventually even non-literature—because they contain personas, invented or found characters, who *utter themselves* and speak for themselves. The author who made up or discovered these speakers may or may not agree with what they say and in any case could hardly be represented more than very partially by them. The technique is a natural for satire, especially of the sort where speakers betray themselves, hang themselves, or make fools of themselves.

At any rate, a serious cognitive issue lurks within this sometimes giddy, sometimes dark technique, sophisticated in its assumption of irony but primitive too in being essentially an aping of real life behavior. As in the theater, it throws the reader or viewer into a point of view, a mind, without a hand-holding guide or narrator or cozy authorial host. As in real life, it poses a problem of comprehending on your own what you behold.

Objectors to the books frequently misunderstood selections throughout the program where ironic meanings were involved or where created characters held the textual stage. What shows this is the attributing to the author—or even the compiler of the anthology!—of thoughts uttered by his characters. It's as if we were to ascribe to Shakespeare the sentiments uttered by all the dolts and rogues and murderers in his plays, or uttered even by his kings and wits. So behind the objection "trash" to *Monologue and Dialogue* (and we offered three other books of that title) lay not only

revulsion to the content of some selections but great discomfort with a technique that makes the reader judge for himself. I think the objectors did not fully understand what was going on in the soliloquies by Strindberg, O'Hara, J. F. Powers, Browning, and Eliot or at any rate did not know what they were supposed to think.

The speakers in all but "Journey of the Magi" are *intended* to earn our disapproval or scorn. The self-revelation of a gullible or vicious person seems to give voice to evil, but clearly the one who is creating such a voice—the author—is trying through the irony to put across a very moral view. (One kind of irony is to say the opposite of what you mean in order to say better what you do mean, as in the expression, "Fine friend you are!") To be irritated by irony goes with an intolerance of ambiguity and partly characterizes the highly restricted thinking that emerges as the hallmark of book banning. The college-bound youngsters to whom this book was addressed seem quite capable of seeing how to take this technique. In fact, I have often had teen-agers *write* stories of this sort, and one result was included in the book, a monologue spoken by a nosy neighbor intruding on a new apartment tenant, written by a ninth-grade girl.

It is difficult to know when the censors misunderstood selections because of insensitivity to literary expression and when because of oversensitivity about particular subjects. Poems on Christ they consistently regarded as sacrilegious and blasphemous, whereas none I have ever read, in or out of the condemned programs, would I regard as such. Theirs may be a case of militance impairing intelligence. Many modern poets ranging from A. E. Housman and Ezra Pound to recent and often little known poets have retold the story of Christ in vernacular language and contemporary dress. It is very clear to most readers that far from disparaging or ridiculing Christ, as charged, they want to put across the message of the Gospels in an entertaining way to people of today who may not read the Bible or may otherwise feel that Christianity doesn't have much to do with life as they know it.

In a high school book called *Narrative Poetry* we included two such poems. Charles Causley's "Ballad of the Bread Man" begins with a colloquial version of the Annunciation. Mary is standing in the kitchen baking a loaf of bread when an angel flies in and says, "We've a job for you." In this light style the poem goes on to tell the Nativity as it might happen today, but through the breezy manner we hear a reverential note that sounds the real meaning of the poem. Christ is imagined as a bread man who, with a paper crown on his head, goes around offering everybody bread from his father. But nobody is interested, nobody sees "the god in himself/Quietly standing there." The objectors called this "A mockery of Christ's birth and life."

In "The Ballad of the Carpenter" Ewan MacColl characterizes Christ as a friend of the working man.

> Now, Jesus walked among the poor, for
> the poor were his own kind,
> And they wouldn't let the cops get near
> enough to take him from behind,
> Yes, to take him from behind.
>
> So they hired a man of the traitor's trade,
> and a stool pigeon was he.
> And he sold his brother to the butcher's
> men for a fistful of silver money,
> A fistful of money. . . .

The ballad ends:

> Two thousand years have passed and gone,
> and many a hero, too,
> And the dream of this poor carpenter, at
> last it's coming true,
> Yes, at last it's coming true.[3]

This too was judged as "Mockery of Christ's life and death on the cross."

One modern classic of this genre was anthologized by several of the programs purchased in Kanawha County. It is a monologue by one of the three Magi telling of the journey to Bethlehem and of the effects of experiencing the Nativity. This is the concluding section.

> All this was a long time ago, I remember*
> And I would do it again, but set down
> This set down
> This: were we led all that way for
> Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
> We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
> But had thought they were different; this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
> We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
> With an alien people clutching their gods.
> I should be glad of another death.[4]

Objection: "Journey of the Maji" [*sic*] by T. S. Eliot. This poem is a take-off on the Bible. The birth they say was "Hard and bitter agony for us like

*Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from "Journey of the Magi" from *Collected Poems 1909–1962* by T. S. Eliot.

> Death, our death." It is poking fun of [*sic*] the birth of Jesus. (This is teaching religion, indirectly.)

Deleting valued moments of great literature on such grounds constitutes a danger that can be frightening indeed if we consider that such objections have increased nationally at a rapid rate since 1974.

The chief objection repeats the chronic fear that the life of Christ is being used as a subversive vehicle to make negative statements about Christianity. This is not so of course. This Magus or Wise Man is saying that after the stunning advent of Christ's presence in the world, his life and that of others was changed so profoundly that the witnesses in one sense die. In fact, all the word play on birth and death expresses the "born again" idea so dear to fundamentalists. Physical birth and death are played off against spiritual birth and death, as the capital letters help to indicate. One who has witnessed Christ can no longer live the old life and would just as well let it die.

The reasons why the objectors missed the meaning touch deeply on the concerns raised by this whole Kanawha case. Thinking overconcretely typifies so-called fundamentalist thinking. Death and birth are construed *only* as physical and hence the poem as negative. They think the poem is saying that the birth of Christ made people want to die! The objectors did not recognize the born-again aspect—spiritual rebirth after the death of "the old dispensation"—because in their view the born-again Christian doesn't suffer afterwards: Christ redeems you by taking past sin and suffering on his own head, and you become light and free, as Graley described. It is all taken care of for you, whereas the view of Eliot, like that of many other Christians, is that "You must work out your salvation with diligence," as Eliot has the spiritual figure say to the couple in *The Cocktail Party*. The Wise Man understands from the appearance of Christ's new spirituality in the world that people have to take on a new responsibility and can no longer act like children who don't know any better and who do right only because some patriarch commands them. The objectors did not understand the poem because their view of Christ as Savior does not prepare them to expect the individual to take on a responsibility so awesome that it entails the death of the old self. "Jesus Saves" indeed.

I invite the reader to explain for herself or himself why the reviewer misinterpreted the following text, "The Cherry Tree Carol," which we included in a book of ballads. Here is the full text of the version we published in *Interaction*.

1. When Joseph was an old man,
   An old man was he,
   He married Virgin Mary,
   The Queen of Galilee.

2. Then Mary spoke a few words,
   So meek and so mild,
   "Joseph, gather me some cherries,
   For I am with child."

3. Then Joseph flew in anger,
   In anger flew he:
   "Let the father of the baby
   Gather cherries for thee."

4. Then Jesus spoke a few words,
   A few words spoke he:
   "Give my mother some cherries,
   Bow low down, cherry tree."

5. The cherry tree bowed low down,
   Bowed low down to the ground,
   And Mary gathered cherries
   While Joseph stood around.

6. Then Joseph feared and trembled,
   Bowed low down on his knees:
   "What have I done, Lord?
   Have mercy on me."

7. Then Joseph spoke a few words,
   A few words spoke he:
   "Oh, tell us, little baby.
   When thy birthday will be?"

8. "The sixth day of Januare
   My birthday will be,
   When the stars and the elements
   Will tremble with glee."[5]

"*Objection:* The lyrics of this song are subtly sacrilegious and can be construed to cast aspersion on the scriptural account of the virginity of Mary the Mother of Jesus."

Numerous songbooks for the home contain this carol, a standard that seems to enshrine a folk legend like many others inspired by the life of Christ but not told in the gospels. Since so much folk literature is born of the effort to understand spiritual things, I think that this carol uses Joseph to represent the common man's reaction to hearing that Mary is with child. In chastising Joseph's cynical assumption it teaches us all to stay alert for divinity, to recognize spirituality behind familiar appearances.

In a book of fables for secondary school we included "The True Christian" from one of the newspaper columns of satirist Arthur Hoppe, whom I have read for years in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and never known to turn his perceptive humor against basic human values or true

Christians. In his fable a faddist son hopping on one bandwagon after another—"Gestalt jogging, transcendental massage, elementary Zoroastrianism, advanced astrology"—prompts his father to ask what's wrong with Christianity. Turning his enthusiasm on this new religion from his parents, the son joins Juniors for Jesus and pushes his parents into giving so much to the poor that the family itself teeters on the brink of poverty. Only the son's sudden shift of interest to "Ecumenical Taoism" saves the situation. At the end the mother blames the father for "telling him he ought to be a Christian," and the father says defensively, "I meant a Christian like us." Clearly, *both* generations are satirized. Hoppe's moral is, "Don't worry about today's generation gap. It could be worse."[6] The objection: "Sarcastic and cynical of the Christian religion."

Many poets write antihunting poems, and many youngsters like such poems because they identify strongly with animals, even well into adolescence. Rural places like the bulk of Kanawha County, however, go big for hunting. Although this conflict of values underlies Humbert Wolfe's ironic poem "The Gray Squirrel" and probably underlies some of the antipathy it aroused, the explicit objection to it assumed again that the target was Christianity. Actually, like Hoppe, Wolfe holds up Christian ideals as the criteria against which the real target is judged. Here is the whole poem, from a secondary school collection called *Lyric Poetry*.

Like a small gray
coffeepot
sits the squirrel.
He is not

all he should be,
kills by dozens
trees, and eats
his red-brown cousins.

The keeper, on the
other hand,
who shot him, is
a Christian, and

loves his enemies,
which shows
the squirrel was not
one of those.[7]

Objection: This poem cynically derides Christianity, supposedly because the person who shot the squirrel was a Christian. Apparently, no matter or context is so remote or obtuse that it cannot be made a pretext for heaping abuse upon Christianity and Christian people. Granted, professing Chris-

> tians have their fair share of human frailty. It is nonetheless remarkable to observe a textbook publisher of reading materials for public school students leaving no stone unturned in an absolutely frantic effort to heap scorn and abuse on Christians, the Bible, and Christianity at every conceivable opportunity. This mood and attitude permeates this entire series of textbooks, and for this reason (among other reasons) the books containing such material are by no means acceptable for use in any tax-supported school system.

Serious Christian moralists have always pointed, as Wolfe does here, to contradictions between belief and behavior. The reader may object that hunting does not violate Christian doctrine, but to interpret the poem as the objector does is to confuse, at the least, the fallible members of a church with the teachings of that religion. The irony of the last stanza is admittedly more complicated than the irony in "The True Christian" because "those" refers ambiguously to both "enemies" and "Christians." One might argue that if adults interpret the poem as anti-Christian, so will youngsters. I think youngsters are more inclined to defend animals and so less prone than adults to look for offense against religion.

The poem has been anthologized several times for school use, perhaps because of its discussion value. Students can talk about whether killing animals is wrong or un-Christian. Some young readers may well feel that the poem is unfair because squirrels, not being people, are neither friends nor enemies and don't come under the cover of Christian charity. Fine. Since the poem would have provoked such students to make their religion more their own, if they're Christians, or to refine their moral understanding about conflicts in values, challenging the poem would satisfy some educational reasons for including it.

But the objectors do not approve of supplying students with literature that might prompt them to think further about inherited ideas and values. This disapproval implies that thinking further will more likely weaken than reinforce what parents have transmitted to children. Why this lack of confidence that their values will stand the test of thought and experience? This matter is central to the whole controversy. To the extent that we textbook compilers included selections that either invited students to think about their home heritage or that supplemented that heritage with ideas not taught at home, we were "subversive." Fike is right that the conflict is about—in my words now—whether school is to offer only what the student already has from parents or something new from outside.

Let's take another subject but one also loaded—socioeconomic class. Miners, mountaineers, policemen, and hardhats usually share some similar working-class values with each other and with many of the Kanawha dissenters. I have strong sympathies with these people, as do many of the

writers whose work we represented in the *Interaction* anthologies. One of the more painful ironies to issue from the whole drama of the controversy was the realization that the dissenters construed as adverse even selections championing the cause of working people. It's as if they don't know who their real friends and enemies are. A high school *Interaction* book called *Reportage* will serve as a case in point. It drew this verdict from the book protesters: "All of the stories in this book propagate radical ideology which advocates hatred for one's country, lawbreaking, racial strife, etc."

First, less than half of the 26 diverse selections could conceivably be construed as broaching some political or ideological issue on behalf of *any* side. The emotion aroused by a few articles causes the objectors to read ideas into other innocuous items or to ignore the rest of the book. But mainly – and this constitutes the core of the problem – articles taking the side of working people will usually seem disloyal to the American system, because taking the worker's side so often means exposing some injustice to which he or she is subjected. The censors may mutter curses themselves about low pay or bad working conditions set by the government or large companies, but when a spokesman articulates their viewpoint publicly, they either don't recognize their feelings or disapprove of such criticism.

In *Reportage* we included four selections that, naïvely perhaps, we would have expected these people to see as protective of their interests or sympathetic to their situations. "The Lot of a Policeman's Wife" simply relayed very directly the pain of constantly worrying for a husband's safety while at the same time enduring hostility and accusations from some of the citizenry. This received the objection that it "leads the reader to believe that a policeman's wife and policemen themselves are helpless ignorant persons who are pawns and 'lackeys' of a brutal white racist establishmentarian order," an idea neither stated nor implied in this article.

The dissenters ignored the other three selections. "Fate Deals a Last Blow to Mountaineer," tells how the United States Forestry Service buried with a bulldozer a man's home because in resurveying to make more room for commercial pine they had concluded he was living on National Forest land. "Death on a Bridge" is Gay Talese's very moving account of a hard-hat's death working on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Most pertinently, "Mine Profits Leave Record of Death" asserts forcefully that company violations of mining safety regulations routinely cause the deaths of miners, and that state inspectors and union officials collude in such violations. This article was reprinted from *The Guardian*, just the sort of radical paper that miners would disapprove of despite its responsible presentation of their case. And there is the dilemma.

The people most victimized by corporations are the very ones who

resent most any criticism of capitalism. They believe more in "free enterprise" than the corporation executives, who long ago learned that they can make more money collaborating to restrain trade and fix prices or by getting the government to protect and subsidize them than by competing and leaving matters to the vagaries of supply and demand. Similarly, the people most at the mercy of governmental incompetence or corruption savagely attack anyone trying to expose these rotten spots. Fact-finding and rational analysis are regarded as disloyal tearing down of our country and "our way of life." Clear-thinking attacks on corruption get equated with overthrowing the system—a serious error. One mind-stumping effect of this favoring of slogan and shibboleths over enlightened self-interest is that working-class people abet their abusers (who scorn them for it) and persecute those who might help them. It is of course not liberals who come and "stripmine the land" and "take what the can," as the song says on Avis Hill's record, but capitalist corporations. When religious conservatives join commercial conservatives, only the latter gain. It is true that today blue-collar workers will march and demonstrate and strike in defiance of leaders and even break laws and commit violence to get their way. But they do not seem to regard this sort of actions as belonging to the same universe as talking and thinking and reading books.

As with the subject of Christianity, so with that of socioeconomic class. The objections are sometimes based on differences in how one relates a text to one's life, not actually on differences in values. The dissenters and the authors share some essential values more than it appears from the objections, where a red flag run up in the mind blocks that mind from detecting the author's overall drift and intent.

Suppose now we let subject matter fall out as it may, miscellaneously, and focus just on textual comprehension. I mentioned earlier a fictional diary by Ring Lardner, "I Can't Breathe." It purports to be the diary that a very giddy eighteen-year-old girl of the flapper era of the twenties is keeping while staying at a resort hotel with her aunt and uncle. She gets engaged several times a year and no sooner falls in love with one young man than a new suitor or an old beau claims her heart and, of course, her hand once again. In her diary she prates immaturely about the older generation, recounts her maneuvers with her boyfriends, and ends fantasizing a solution to her numerous engagements—a series of marriages timed so as to allow her to get what she wants from each man. After castigating the Ring Lardners senior and junior for being Communist, the objection to this story continued:

> This book reeks of generation gap encouragement, encourages deceit and out and out lies, refers to policemen in the same light as a convict, a drunkard or something queer. Teaches disrespect for policemen in two different places.

> Treats drinking to excess and smoking as the perfectly natural thing to do, and suggests that multiple marriages are the ideal situation. A marriage for every season. An absolutely ridiculous story.

Indeed it is an absolutely ridiculous story, and it is supposed to be. The girl is being ridiculed through her own words. As an example of some things the objection refers to, here is part of an entry after a dance at which her aunt and uncle expressed approval of her latest beau.

> I guess it is a big surprise to a girl's parents and aunts and uncles to find out that the boys you go around with are all right, they always seem to think that if I seem to like somebody and the person pays a little attention to me, why he must be a convict or a policeman or a drunkard or something queer.[8]

Such a story gives adolescent readers an entertaining opportunity to get some critical distance on feelings and attitudes they may actually share in a less extreme way with this diarist. Any experienced teacher, or any parents not afraid of losing their children, would never question that students will see the girl as making herself look ridiculous by showing how scatterbrained she is.

The question, and the reason I cite this objection, concerns why the dissenters took the story so amiss. What, again, are the roots of such incomprehension? Did knowing Ring Lardner was the author give the objector a mental set that turned an obviously lighthearted satire of the flapper mentality into a grim subversion of traditional values? The fact is that the satire, if we take it as serious commentary, really would be on the side of the objector, who surely views the silliness the same way Lardner does. Does the objector feel compelled to pretend to misread the story in order not to wind up a bedfellow with a "known Communist?"

Sondra Spratt's "Hoods I Have Known" is a charming, humorous story told in a mellow mood of reminiscence by a first-person narrator. It had appeared originally in *Mademoiselle*, and we reprinted it in a short story collection called *Fictional Memoir*, emphasizing by this title the resemblance these stories had to actual memoirs. The narrator was a proper, head-of-the-class girl in her urban seventh-grade class who, when punished one day for a little infraction, was moved to the rear of the room, where she got acquainted with some "hoods," older holdovers from poor street gangs. She and the leader attract each other, aware they are opposites, but after a brief puppy love that barely trails once out of the classroom, and during which she enjoys trying to reform him, she is reinstated at the front of the class and the two again go back to their separate worlds.

Objection: This is a rather sad depressing story which is illustrated by a cigarette-smoking picture of a young tough. The story ends with the author's saying he had rather someone be a hoodlum than to be a success in life.

It is hard to imagine how anyone could read a story several thousand words long told by a reiterated "I" who is a girl having a crush on her first boyfriend and still come out thinking the "author" is male. The real author's name, moreover, is obviously feminine, and the title of the book focuses on the nature of the stories as facsimiles of personal recollections. I've had occasion to observe of other extreme lapses in reading comprehension that sometimes a preconception will be so strong that it will override almost any amount of contrary information given in the text. In this case, I believe the preconception may be a sex-role stereotype to the effect that only men write books; an author is a male.

As for the photo, any adolescent will recognize the unsure kid trying to look cool by smoking. It would be totally unreal to think that either the "hood" in the photo or the one in the story would be seized on as a model. Because the objectors branded so many other selections also as "sad and depressing" and as ending with a negative moral, I quote the last paragraph of this story.

> Someone I know says she thinks she saw someone who looked like Danny in a summer theatre production in Woodstock last year. She said that he was still big and had a lot of hair but that he spoke English perfectly. She said he was sweet and looked like Marlon Brando. Despite what my friend says, I don't like to think Danny became an actor. I don't like to think that at all. It makes me sad and a little embarrassed, for that would mean after all my seventh-grade heartbreak and eleven-year-old plans somebody else had reformed Danny after all. I'd rather have him be a fisherman. I'd rather have him be a hood.[9]

Now please look back at how the objection describes the ending of the story. Had a secondary student responded on a test of the story with the interpretation voiced in the objection, we can be sure the teacher would have indicated poor comprehension.

Oscar Lewis is an anthropologist who spent years studying and living with families in the "culture of poverty," as he calls it. He transcribed the oral autobiographies of his subjects, whom he also observed, and put these accounts together as composite pictures of how poor people in places like Mexico and Puerto Rico live and feel. Selections from his work appeared in both *Man* and *Interaction* as nonfiction. Lewis' chronicle from Mexico City, *The Children of Sanchez* (made into a movie starring Anthony Quinn as father Sanchez), was represented by an excerpt

from *Man in the Expository Mode*, 2. The first sentence of the objection below summarizes accurately a part of the behavior pattern of Sanchez.

> The father Sanchez is strict, beats his boys, etc. But when they turn out wrong, he rationalizes.
>
> *Objections:*
>
> 1. The story is deliberately concocted to belittle parents and their knowledge about how to raise children.
> 2. This story belittles discipline.
> 3. Does this story place the entire blame of failure on the part of the parent? Doesn't the school have some responsibility?
> 4. If the editors or author understood children and the "process of education" they wouldn't need to blame the parents. They would know what to do!

The phrase "deliberately concocted" cannot be applied reasonably at all to a true chronicle based mostly on the participants' own accounts and, in any case, clearly labeled "expository," not at least unless one is prepared to charge fraud. The whole commentary suggests that the objector lapsed into thinking that the account is a short story and the author has availed himself of fictional license to rig events to score a criticism.

It is interesting that this reader made so gross an error as this and yet generalized so well about Sanchez' disciplining of his boys. In the classic manner, the objector read into the text something he or she was looking for. Oscar Lewis certainly did not editorialize, "belittle" or "blame." And consider that arch last line, "They would know what to do!"

Although this objection presumably comes under the heading of "challenging authority," it seems to be essentially about parental defensiveness. The selection itself neither challenges authority nor attacks parents. It is aimed another way completely, toward anthropological description of group behavior in a certain milieu. I could assume that this misreading of intention owes to some inexperience and naïveté about modes of discourse such that the objector cannot discriminate fiction from true case history—or made-up narrator from the real author—but maybe the real problem is that the objector's defensive projection would cause misreading even if he or she had benefited from more learning experience in differentiating viewpoints in texts. In other words, suppose it is the powerful prior mind-sets that distort interpretation of a text, and maybe, without this distorting force, differentiation of modes of discourse would not *have* to be learned.

At any rate, so long as one generation forbids the next to read the sorts of selections we have been examining it prolongs its own handicap. Ironically, both *Man* and *Interaction* tried to help students gain sophistication about what authors are doing in various writings by distinctly

separating and labeling modes of discourse and voices of characters and authors. If parents succeed in outlawing such texts, then they make it nearly impossible for their children either to take what someone else says the way it was meant.