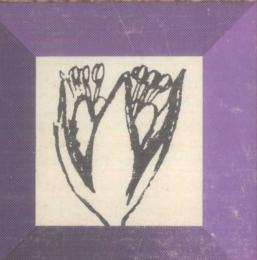
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stories, plays & poems

inscape stories, plays & poems

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San Diego Mesa College

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
Philadelphia New York Toronto

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For

MESSERSCHMIDT

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An Introduction to Literature

WHAT IS ART? Throughout history, man has turned to various forms of art for something which he feels ordinary life cannot give him. He has danced and sung, painted and recited poetry because whatever it was he sensed in these experiences he knew to be a meaningful, perhaps necessary, function of his life. It is obvious that what man seeks in art is not merely more of his everyday existence. He knows that his creation is not a replica of life. An artist, looking at his canvas and seeing the woman he has painted there, knows it is not really his wife. If it were his wife he wanted, the portrait would impel him to find her or grieve for her absence. If he purposely painted her because she was gone and he could not stand being away from her, he would not really be fooled into believing her there alive before him. So, what does the artist gain from his creation? If it is artificial and a poor excuse for life, why does he do it with such dedication and why does civilization profit from his effort? Investigating these questions will lead us naturally to an understanding of literature because literature is first of all art.

We watch a man prepare a field for sowing, conduct a business meeting, or pitch a fast ball and say, "He's a real artist." We watch a pole vaulter execute his finest vault and say, "That's poetry in motion." In each case, what is observed is some special treatment which lifts the experience out of the commonplace.

The vaulter, as an example, is completely concentrated on the moment. He measures his strides. His motions are deliberate, precise, controlled, forcing us to realize that they are not haphazard but that each is perfectly selected to combine into this perfect vault. Here is the quality which causes the spectator to call the vaulter an artist, and here is how art differs from life. Art is an approach which selects, orders, and emphasizes toward some unified statement. It is not so with our lives. They go on in a continuum, with time always forcing the present to slip by before we can grasp it as an isolated moment and understand what really happened or what it meant.

It is only because our complex nervous systems allow us to block and filter that we are able to make any sense out of the barrage of rapid and often conflicting stimuli which confront us at every moment. We have a particularly good time on Saturday and want to recall it the next day, but by then it is gone and our memory is clouded by the events of Sunday. Thus, we feel the need to stop time, to isolate a moment, to experience more clearly. It is for these reasons that we turn to art. While life confronts us randomly, art frames a moment. In one sense, art is artificial, but in another sense, it is the only way we can focus on life. Art is said to improve on life not because it is better but because it is easier to see.

Some pertinent questions emerge from this definition of art: What is the difference between mere sound and music? Why is it often easier to remain numb to life than to art? Why are artists often branded dreamers or threats to society?

THE CREATIVE PROCESS: In literature, as in other art forms, the artist frames a moment, but what moment? Is it one which actually occurred in life or is it one which he created? Although many people would answer simply that life is the source of the writer's material, it is obvious that he did not record all of life and that most of his characters or situations do not even exist as real facts. He did, indeed, make them up from his imagination. When we speak of creative writing, we mean that the novelist, playwright, or poet, unlike the historian or biographer, created the facts of his work. What he wrote about was not the facts themselves but some insight, some idea about life, which

lay behind the facts. It was this idea which caught his attention in the first place and seemed special to him.

As we live each day, we find something special about some experiences and not about others. We may say that we seek no such difference, but for some reason, out of every day, three or four or twenty moments make a unique impression on us. We say, "I talked to this man today and he said—" or "Do you remember the other day when—" or "Today I was thinking about—." While we might grasp the uniqueness of such moments or find satisfaction in communicating them, the writer wants to define them further and express their specialness by rendering them artistically.

Just as anything in our experience can unexpectedly trigger a new thought or fresh insight, so the creative process may begin for the writer with any stimuli: a memory, a sound, a person, an incident. One day he may see two men fighting viciously: suddenly, they may stop, hug each other, throw back their heads and laugh with affection. Like us, the writer may care little about the two men or the location of the fight, or even the reason for the fighting. What he is interested in is the strange moment when they suddenly felt more like laughing than hitting. Part of framing the moment is the writer's concentration on this idea, which he feels to be the essence of the scene, perhaps ignoring completely the original life situation. In his story, we may find nothing to remind us of the incident except a rendition of some moment in life when emotions changed very quickly into their opposite. We will find people, places, and events which are the writer's special way of expressing this idea.

A discussion of the creative process inevitably raises many relevant questions: Where should the distinction be made between a creatively written history and a historical novel? Why does literature usually deal with people rather than oceans or dogs? Is creativity a product of the emotions or the intellect?

Misunderstanding of the creative process may cause problems in appreciating literature. One of these may be an attempt to make an author's biography necessary to an interpretation of his work. Some people wish to research a writer's life to find counterparts for characters in his stories, but when they do this, what