INSIGHTS INTO LITERATURE

Mark Van Doren
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Olga Achtenhagen
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Insights into Literature

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ABOUT THE EDITORS AND LITERARY ADVISERS

Mark Van Doren, after completing his undergraduate work at the University of Illinois, came east to New York City, where he taught at Columbia for many years. His writings embrace scholarly works on a wide range of subjects in both English and American literature, as well as prizewinning poems, plays, and short stories.

Arno Jewett is known to English teachers throughout the country as a specialist in the teaching of English and the training of teachers. His classroom experience began in Alexandria, Minnesota and continued at the University of Minnesota High School. Dr. Jewett has also taught college English and been active in teacher education at the University of Texas and at Columbia. He is the author of *English Language Arts in American High Schools* and other studies published by the U.S. Office of Education.

Olga Achtenhagen, formerly a professor of English at Lawrence College, has taught high-school English in Wisconsin, in Kentucky, and in New Jersey as head of the department at Plainfield High School. With degrees from Lawrence College and Columbia, Miss Achtenhagen continued graduate studies at Cambridge University. Her articles and poems have appeared in professional magazines and in *The Atlantic, The New York Times, Christian Science Monitor,* and *Contemporary Verse.*

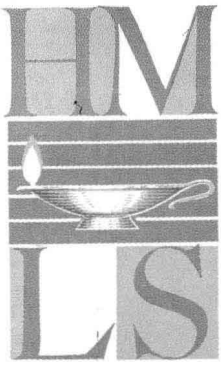
Margaret Early, Professor in Reading and Language Arts at Syracuse University, began her classroom work teaching English in the secondary schools of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Later she was a Warren Research Fellow in English at Boston University. Dr. Early has written numerous professional articles, particularly on English research and teaching.

Mark Schorer is Chairman of the English Department at the University of California in Berkeley. After taking his undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin, Mr. Schorer taught at Dartmouth and Harvard. Besides writing novels, short stories, and numerous reviews of modern American fiction, he is the author of a monumental biography of the American novelist Sinclair Lewis.

David Daiches was born in Scotland and attended the University of Edinburgh; in addition he received graduate degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. He has taught at the University of Chicago, at Cornell, and at Indiana. Currently he is Dean of the School of English and American Studies at the University of Sussex in England. Among his works are critical studies of Milton, Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Willa Cather. Of his *A Critical History of English Literature,* the poet Robert Hillyer has written, "There is nothing equal to it . . . in the field of English literature."

Mary Ellen Chase, long a favorite professor of English at Smith College, began her distinguished teaching career in rural Maine and later taught in midwestern secondary schools before taking her doctorate at the University of Minnesota. Her writings include *The Bible and the Common Reader* and many sensitive novels.

ABOUT THE TITLE PAGES: *The fourteenth-century tapestry reproduced opposite the title page shows the heroic King Arthur, whose legend provided the inspiration for Tennyson's long poem* Idylls of the King. *H. K. Browne's engraving depicts a climactic scene from Dickens's celebrated novel* A Tale of Two Cities. *The church at Stratford-on-Avon, pictured under the title, is where William Shakespeare, England's greatest dramatist, lies buried.*



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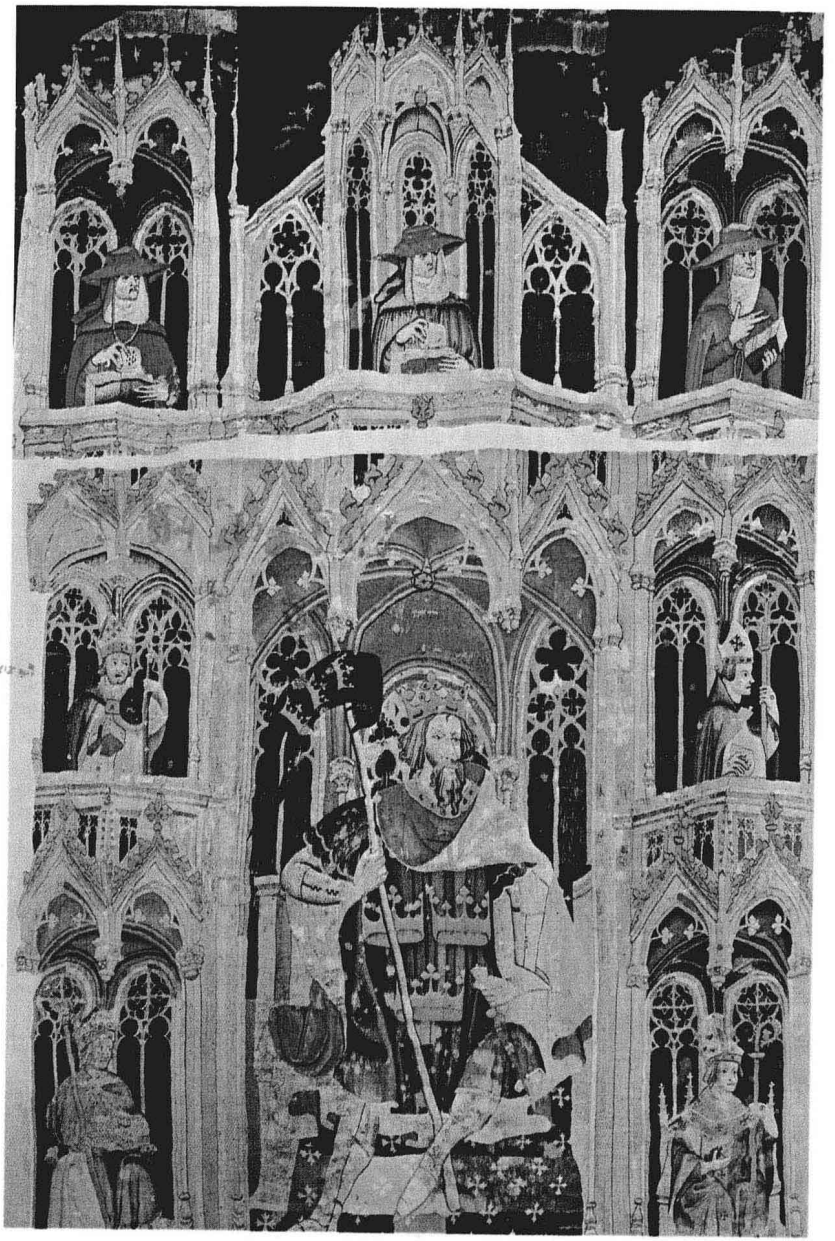

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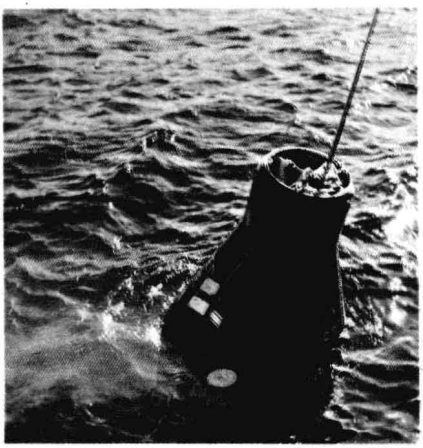

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Truth is stranger than fiction . . . Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn't.
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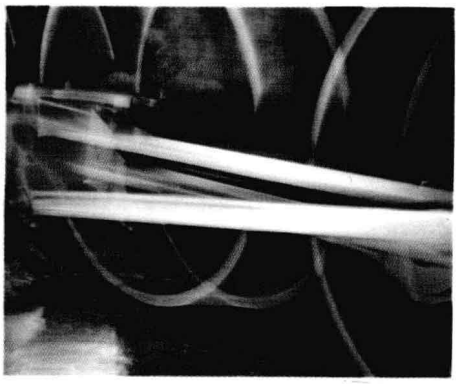

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Poetry is a packsack of invisible keepsakes.

Carl Sandburg

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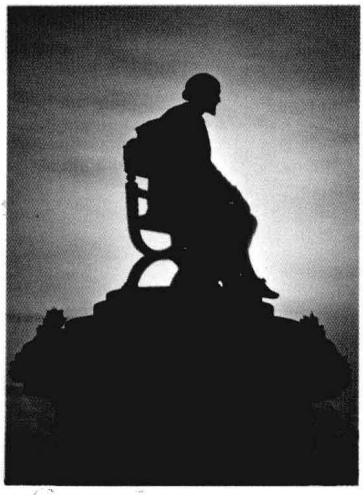

Drama

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Novel

There is no past, so long as books shall live.
EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

Approaching Literature

MARK VAN DOREN

From everything we do we learn. As human beings we have a natural desire to learn, and most of the time the experience is pleasurable; even bitter things, we think, are better known than unknown, for then they are somehow subject to our control. But there is one form of learning from which delight is never absent, and indeed there is no learning here without delight. The reading of literature benefits us through the very pleasure it gives. The benefit is immense, and the pleasure is undeniable. Or so it should be. Reading for pleasure is exactly the same thing as reading for profit, and vice versa. A book we have not enjoyed will never do us any good.

The good reader hopes to have pleasure from the book before him, and surrenders to it willingly. As he reads he does not doubt or argue or complain. He is like a good listener, who waits to hear more before he speaks himself. To be sure, there are books which it is impossible for some readers to like, and which they close after they have given them a fair chance. But they do give them that chance. And the books they find themselves enjoying they read to the end with open, uncritical

minds, accepting what is there on its own terms, not theirs. The good reader is generous, like the good listener, the good friend.

When he has closed the book at last he begins to think about it. He now for the first time considers its faults, if it has any. And he is as hard on these as he likes, or as he can be. He has become a critic rather than a reader. But first of all he was a reader, and made sure that he knew what was in the book. If the author was making statements or presenting a point of view, the reader gave himself thoroughly to the understanding of the statements, of the point of view. It was only then, indeed, that he became capable of differing intelligently with the author. And the same thing is true if the author was telling a story. The whole of the story was taken in; and now, if the reader pleases, he may go over it in his mind and say to himself that it was false here, or shallow there. Or if the author was a poet, the reader listened to his lines at the same time that he pondered what they meant. The meaning of a poem is inseparable from its music, and the good reader knows this. If meaning was absent, or the music faint, now is the time to say so, not before.

The best sign that the book or the story or the poem was imperfect is that it did not give perfect pleasure. The pleasure is inseparable from the profit, as the delight is from the learning. And what is it that we learn from literature? We learn what the world is like. Not what it is, for we may never know that. But what it is like. And if it is like nothing save itself, since there is no other world with which to compare it, we still do not know exactly what it is. We only know that literature can be like it. The finest compliment we can pay a book is to say that it is lifelike, or like life. Literature is an imitation of the world. This was said long ago, and nothing truer has been said since. It is what Hamlet meant when he spoke of holding a mirror up to nature. Art reflects reality. It does not define it, or explain it; it is an image of it. And we take enormous pleasure in those images which are clear and true. Even if we cannot define life, we know when art distorts it rather than reflects it. Nature is nothing to us without art, and art is nothing to us without nature; the two go together as the mirror goes with him who gazes at it.

Art is sometimes called creative, though men in fact are not creators. They are only imitators, and most of them are not very good at even that. This is why they value those who know how to imitate wisely and

well. Imitation is more, of course, than copying. It is understanding and appreciating, though first of all it is noticing what things are like in themselves. The creator, if he must be called that, is a noticer before he is anything else. Then he renders what he notices. And we for whom he does the rendering have in turn the pleasure of recognition. Yes, we say, that is the way things are. We knew it before, but there is a peculiar satisfaction in knowing it again — which in Latin is called re-cognition. And knowing it better. For the good artist improves our power to see, to hear, to feel, and to know. And particularly he improves our power to find beauty and excitement in the world. He is not a good artist unless he does this. The world we find in the greatest storytellers — Homer, for example, and Shakespeare — is not strange to us, for it is the world we live in; but it has an energy, a depth, a color, which we had not known were there until these masters revealed them to us. They make us glad we are alive. That is why we are so grateful to them, and why we say we love them.

The pages that follow will take the student who reads them into many corners of life, both remote and near, and the means by which he travels there will vary as the forms of writing vary. The forms of writing vary but the material of it does not. The material is life, which is the same everywhere, even though circumstance and custom can make us doubt this. The writer and the reader are inhabitants of the same world, and share with each other their understanding of it. The writer may have stumbled upon strange places and novel truths, yet in the end these must be recognizable or we shall not believe him, and hence shall learn nothing from him. Absolute strangeness is of no lasting interest, and neither perhaps is absolute familiarity. The best results flow out of writing which makes the familiar strange — that is, more interesting than we thought it was before we had thought much about it. Or else it makes the strange familiar — credible after all, and comprehensible.

All forms of writing have this double end in view, and therefore do not vary as widely as they seem to at first glance. The short story, the poem, the essay, the report of experience, the play, the novel — all of these, however far apart their points of origin, have a single destination: our entertainment. Nor is entertainment a light word, nor is it a light thing. It means the mind at play, taking pleasure while it learns.

A game of chess, which opens "The Monkey's Paw" (page 7), bears striking resemblances to a good short story. Like characters in fiction, chess pieces follow logical patterns that bring them into conflict in ways generating tension and often producing the unexpected.

About the only chance for the truth to be told is in fiction.

O. HENRY

Short Story

The short story, like the short poem, has no time to waste. It must get to its goal — the revelation of a single moment, a single truth — with the least possible expenditure of apparent effort. Much effort may go into its making, but the reader is not expected to consider this. On the contrary, it is assumed that he will be so absorbed in the people and the situation that he can think of nothing but what must happen at the end. What does happen may surprise him, or it may not; but meanwhile he must reach that end. The writer's job is to make the end interesting before it comes, and of course, convincing when it does. It will always, doubtless, have a certain surprise in it. It will go, that is, beyond the reader's expectation, whether or not it is the opposite of what he predicted. It will reveal more truth in the moment at hand than he had so far seen.

Any good story, however short, has a vast background most of which remains invisible, like the submerged portion of an iceberg. It is all that the writer knows and understands. This moment of particular truth would not be truly interesting unless it implied more than it stated, unless it suggested more than it told. Yet its first business is to state and tell. It must be sharp and clear, like a single beam of sunlight. The shadows beyond we may explore later on, at our leisure.

Mark Van Doren