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Literature and Life.

"Dear Father: The Professor of English Literature at this (European) State University has been giving a course in modern authors. Since this course is supposed to be of university calibre, the professor feels that criticism of the authors should enter largely into his treatment. Up to the present his policy has been to criticize not only the literary merits of the writers but also their moral and immoral tendencies, because, claims the professor, the two forms of criticism cannot be dissociated.

"Some students, however, have taken issue with this belief and maintain that the class in English Literature should not be made a class in Moral Theology. That is the difficulty. Our professor would like to have your opinion on the matter. Is he to continue his policy of pointing out and condemning immoral tendencies in certain present-day writers or is he to criticize solely literary achievement? A Bulletin reader, our professor is in accord with your stand on G.B.S., and would like to know if he is justified in condemning perhaps more unmercifully what is bad in certain other modern authors. Would you please give me your view in this matter? -- S.K."

Happy the class whose professor knows that literature and life cannot be separated - that the laws of life are the laws of literature! It is a point of view all too uncommon nowadays - all but forgotten, indeed, outside the Catholic Church. The passion for free speech, free press, free thought, has been carried to absurd lengths; as a result, we have suffered serious damage to our individual and social life. Morals have been corrupted, loyalties undermined, culture retarded. Even civilization has suffered.

What would you think of a professor of medicine who would expose his pupils to contagious diseases without any warnings against the contagion, with no prophylaxis against the exposure? Should a professor of chemistry turn his laboratory section over to experimentation with explosives without informing his charges of the nature of the materials he furnishes them? Civil laws are explicit in requiring pharmacists to mark poisons with distinctive labels.

And these dangers affect only our physical well-being. Is the soul less important than the body? Is the undermining of morals a minor thing compared with the loss of an eye? Our Blessed Lord gave us certain criteria in these matters: "If thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out;" "be not afraid of them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do... Fear ye him who after he hath killed hath power to cast into Hell."

The Professor of English Literature in these days has a serious obligation before God. As Father Cavanaugh once said: "You cannot read an author for his style without absorbing some of his philosophy." Youth is impressionable. Young minds are easily soiled. And God gives us only one mind. Much of the pessimism that lies at the root of our social evils today should be laid squarely to the charge of the professors of literature who a generation ago taught the men who today are blowing out their brains rather than face disagreeable situations. These professors encouraged sophistication, ridiculed the conventions, robbed youth of the joy of living, and gave us the ruthless, hard-boiled men and women who have all but wrecked society today.

For a Catholic the matter is settled. The Index of Forbidden Books, and the general decree on which the list is based, show us that she knows what harm comes of indiscriminate reading. A class in English Literature of today that is not at the same time a class in Moral Theology entails a responsibility which we would not care to face at the Last Judgment. Let the students gripe - they do that far better than they study. But guide and protect their reading or their accusations at the Last Judgment will make you wish you had not shirked this responsibility.