



WHAT
IS

Price
10¢

DECENT?
LITERATURE!

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The
Pamphlet-a-Month Guild

TRADE MARK REG.

Imprimi potest:

Peter Brooks, S. J.

Praep. Prov. Missourianae

Nihil obstat:

F. J. Holweck

Censor Librorum

Imprimatur:

✠ Joannes J. Glennon

Archiepiscopus Sti. Ludovici

Sti. Ludovici, die 16 Maii 1940

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Deacidified

What IS Decent Literature?

Well what precisely do you mean by decent literature?

Here's a group of people standing before the shelves of a public library. One reaches his hand out greedily for the new best seller. He is amazed and delighted that there happens by some accident to be on the shelf a copy that no one else has managed to grab first.

If someone walked up to him and said, "Put it back; it's an immoral book," he might make any of several replies. He might say, "So what?" and laugh at the objector for antediluvian prudery. He might say, "What nonsense!" and deliver a lecture on his theory that no book can be either moral or immoral, any more than a sandwich or a pencil or a sidewalk can be decent or indecent. He might put the book back with a sincere "Thanks for telling me; I didn't know." He might sneer and say, "Oh a Catholic! Is that what you are?" and walk off to read the book with new relish.

How Come?

On another shelf there's a highly popular French author who, though long dead, still remains on the famous Roman Index of Prohibited Books. What put him on that Index in the first place? His books have a great lot of swashbuckling heroes and a number of heroines who are as full of charm

as they are free from scruples or inhibitions. His stories are loud and lusty and gay and gusty and carry the reader along to the flash of swords and the beat of horses' hoofs and the beckoning gleam in a lovely lady's eyes. Were those works slapped into the prison of the Index just because the author had such a zest for life?

Of course there are on the Index many solemn books on philosophy and theology—but nobody would read 'em anyhow.

And under the arm of the young girl who is entering the library is a lurid-bound magazine that is called True something-or-other. Somebody says it's indecent. But if it's true (or is it?), how can it be indecent? And why slap that piece of junk into the same inclusive category, indecent, into which was put that great novel recently made into a motion picture and also frowned on as not moral?

What in the world is decent? What's indecent? moral? What do you mean by moral? immoral? Oh people can be immoral, but a book standing primly on the shelves of a library— Isn't it silly to talk about the thing as if it were a human being with a mind determined on crime and lust and a nice gummy murder?

Beaten Words

I'll have to admit that the words moral and decent have taken a bit of a beating in recent years. Some not-remote time ago the motion-picture industry, realizing that it was faced with the double danger of rising public indignation and national censorship, decided to clean up its own houses. The story of what the producers did and how they did it is now common property. The basis of their house cleaning was a Code

signed and sealed by all the big men in the industry. In that Code they agreed that certain things are moral and certain things are immoral; certain things can be done on the screen and certain things cannot be done on the screen without harming audiences. So they banned the immoral, the harmful; they issued free passports to the moral, decent, humanly helpful.

Yet George Seldes in his recent book, "The Catholic Crisis" (whatever would a non-Catholic know about that anyhow?), lights into the Catholics who had a deal to do with that Code and tears them to pieces. Since I wrote the Code—at the request of the industry—I was much interested in his viewpoint. His was a simple confession that he didn't know what was right, what was wrong, what was decent, what was indecent. For he said in effect that we were presumptuous: After centuries of disagreement on the part of great thinkers with regard to what is moral and what is immoral, we had dared to sit down and write into a Code of some half-dozen pages of type a final decision about all this.

Ironic Laughter

Time, The Weekly Newsmagazine, in the course of a book review in the issue of January 29, 1940, went a step further. It referred to the "immortally funny" motion-picture Code.

Now in view of the fact that the Code forbids pictures to show sympathy for crime and villainy or present explicit methods of murder, scenes exciting to lust, attacks on marriage as an institution, insults to our flag and country, obscenity, perversions, the dope traffic, one could draw the not-unnatural conclusion that the smart

aleck who wrote that review for Time thought anyone who opposed these rather obvious crimes a very, very amusing, highly stupid, and—to use his other choice expression—“anthropologically fascinating” person.

Perhaps the reviewer thinks that he would not have been funny had he written a code of motion-picture ethics and advocated films to praise murder, obscenity, lust, the destruction of the family, and treason to one's country. Because with the collaboration of other men interested in the good of my country and mankind I asked the motion pictures to veto these things, I am “anthropologically fascinating and immortally funny.”

Well I prefer my idea of fun — and decency—to that of the Time reviewer.

Some Like It Dirty

It's really rather amazing that people should want to write—or read—dirt. But the plain fact is that in dealing with books we have to remember that there are such people. There are the writers who frankly like dirt; and they, like the immortal tellers of dirty stories, will go on with their obscenity till death, the police, senility, conscience (improbable), or the results of their own evil living catch up with them.

For as there are human beings who peddle opium to high-school children, and unspeakable people who teach little children the ways of vice, and eternal Fagins running schools for the education of young pick-pockets and thieves, so there are men and women who will write dirty books and edit dirty magazines. It's a livelihood, isn't it? Yes; and more than that: It often turns out to be a very spacious livelihood — as is

racketeering or gangsterism under the system known as organized crime.

So they put out their various grades of printed dirt in various forms, all the way from filthy cards slipped into the hands of children in fifth grade in return for a nickel to big syndicated weekly news magazines running their circulation up to 5,000,000 by the simple process of parading the sins of the idle rich, Paris apaches, and prostitutes. And between these groups are the writers whose novels smell to high heaven. Not even the reviewer in Time would find them funny or anthropologically interesting — I hope.

Job for the Police

Since the dawn of recorded history women have sold their bodies and men have sold their souls for money. And because it is easy through the printed page to sell both bodies and souls and reap a not-unappreciable return in solid cash, publishers will continue to print and writers will continue to write the frankest dirt, the most blatant obscenity, the foulest crime and vice as long as they can turn a dishonest penny or a fortune by so doing.

Every so often the police take these people in hand. And neither George Seldes nor the Time reviewer would protest that these people are guiltless as doves or cooing babes.

People who want to write dirt will write it as long as they can get away with it. And we can only treat them as the common criminals they are. For no one can have any doubt about the criminality of the stuff they grind out of their ratty souls.



Self-justification

There is a second group of writers who write to justify their own evil ways of living. They like to be bad, but they find it hard to square their conduct with their own conscience or with the civilization that is Christianity. So they write a book about their sins. James Joyce's reportedly autobiographical "Portrait of an Artist As a Young Man" seems to be such a book. Oscar Wilde defended his sins all through his writings until he lay dying of those indefensible sins and waiting for the baptism that was to wash away the guilt of a lifetime.

It is remotely possible that an absolutely clean-minded person might write a book that seemed to be evil. I doubt very much that a man has to become a murderer to be able to write about a murderer. If that were the case, that notably innocent breed known as detective-story writers would be badly wanted by the police.

But when a man starts to write dirty books, I begin to "hae me doubts" about the man. He may be a cherub; I'd be willing to lay a small sum (consistent with my Jesuit vow of poverty) that all his knowledge of dirt was not gleaned by hearsay. I've noticed that many a novelist defender of infidelity has quite a divorce-court record. And while men may write of murderers without having to go out and slit a throat or two, men who write of lust seem to do so against backgrounds of their own not-too-spotless lives.

Just Confused

I would be plain stupid however if I contended that everyone who wrote an immoral or indecent book was personally like his

characters. For a very large per cent of the human race is merely very much confused on the whole matter of what is right and what is wrong.

When we were working on that motion-picture Code, I had occasion to meet many leaders and read many suggested codes; always I was left with the feeling that they were extremely vague on the question of right and wrong, foggy, confused, wandering about in marshy, slippery quicksand. I found for instance that little distinction was made between the breaking of the then prohibition law and the spending of the week end with an absent friend's wife. Both acts were wrong, weren't they? Hollywood was considerably excited over the danger of a screen hero's saying hell or damn and considerably calm in face of the possibility that he might seduce his secretary.

A Century of It

Now I am convinced that in time to come learned scholars will analyze our century as the Century of Confusion. We have suffered from a deliberate conspiracy on the part of self-appointed autoanointed intellectuals who went about the world throwing up smoke screens in front of the Ten Commandments and the natural law.

Every time I hear or read of Bertrand Russell as a great moral teacher, I could shriek with laughter if it were not that I want to shed tears of pity and rage. Bertrand Russell with his divorce-court record and the implicit admission that he and his wife taught promiscuity in their books and lectures, while the court records show that they themselves have practiced it in their personal lives! Bertrand Russell teaching the young that the terms right and

wrong are interchangeable and that the words love and lust not only have the same number of letters but are expressions of the same general human emotion!

And Russell is just a newspaper-notorious representative of the vast army of sappers who dynamite civilization's idea of what is right and what is wrong.

Private Selection

Protestantism had a lot to do, I'm sorry to say, with our confusion about morality and decency. Mind, I am not for a moment suggesting that thousands of Protestants are not splendidly moral people. But when Protestantism laid down the law of private judgment in matters of faith, it prepared the way for private judgment in matters of morals too. The Protestant demands the right to decide whether when Christ said, "This is my body," He meant "This is my body," or "This looks like my body," or "This is the symbol of my body," or "If you have faith, this will have the effect of strengthening your body," or "Nobody knows just what it means."

The next step was easy. When Christ said, "Blessed are the clean of heart," and "Whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another, committeth adultery against her," He might according to Protestantism have meant it, not meant it, meant it only where it was convenient, meant it except in my particular case, meant it with a lot of exceptions, stated it as an ideal and not as a law, laid it down as a sweet aspiration whose achievement was impossible to ordinary clay males and females, been talking to His own day and not to ours, been uttering sheer nonsense.

Today the average Protestant does not

practice private interpretation. He (or she) practices private selection. Protestants pick and choose from the teachings of Christ those things that they like.

Disagreeing With Christ

Recently in the course of a discussion with a good Protestant lady I quoted against her stand the clear words of Christ. Her answer still fills me with amazement.

"Did Christ really say that?" I assured her that He did and showed her the passage in the Gospels. "Well," she answered, emphatically, "if that's the case, then I'm afraid I shall have to disagree with Jesus."

Private selection!

Logic of Vice

But the confusion about right and wrong goes deeper than that. Bruce Marshall suggests in his book "Father Malachy's Miracle" that keepers of evil houses should pay tribute to professors of science and philosophy who teach young people that they are animals. And he is right. Such teaching is the most wonderful foundation for moral confusion, if not actual moral crookedness.

"You are an animal," thunders the biologist whose faith was scrapped when he was vaccinated.

The smart young man or woman sitting before him goes through a rapid course of reasoning: "Animal, am I? Well let's see how animals act. They grab food, regardless of the other animal's right to it. They have no free will to resist evil or choose good. They are animals, and the synonym for animal is brute or beast. If brute, why not brutal? If beast, why not beastly?"

And morality, human conduct, is more than a little confused if it is measured in

terms, not of what a man should do, but of what an animal under similar circumstances would be impelled by his instincts to do. The jungle morality of the totalitarian prison camps, the aggression of strong nations against weak ones, the right of the male to hunt down the female are all quite justified if men and women are animals, brutes, beasts.

If Man Is God

On the other hand is the group of "thinkers" who find man the only god. "My god is humanity," a physician wrote me not long ago. He was merely saying without literary flourish what George Bernard Shaw has been saying during all the time that his beard has been growing white. Man is god. Man is the highest development of evolution, and hence he is god.

How anyone can look himself in the eye when first he crawls out of bed and still say, "Good morning, god," is a little difficult for me to grasp. But that is not the point. The argument that the "thinkers" pursue is simply this: "If I am god, then I make my own laws. The lawgiver is naturally enough above his law. So as god I shall make and unmake the laws as I choose." Bad philosophy, but easy and convenient practice.

A Cracked Basis

So, silly as the idea is that men are really gods, this became the basis for much of the current confusion. When Henrik Ibsen wrote brilliantly and unhappily about the right of men and women to determine for themselves what shall be the law, he did so because he looked on mankind as the only god. To Shaw human beings are the only gods, with Shaw the most godlike of the

gods. Hence he lets his characters know no law except their own whims. And they have powerfully weak whims, believe me.

With this convenient moral out — the smart idea that man is the only lawmaker and that he can make and unmake the law as he wishes—the novelists went stamped down the dark alley of confusion. Their characters fitted life to the lawlessness of passion and made desire the law of conduct. As the lawgiver the one and only God is sane, reasonable, unchangeable, wise, farseeing. Man as a lawgiver for men was mad, full of passionate desires, fickle, stupid, and shortsighted.

So in the books these men wrote we had the week-end romances and infidelity inside of marriage. Mercy killings and abortions and free love and Robin Hood honesty were sanctioned on the grounds that man was god and made his own laws. All this was justified by the “crackpot” theory that men and women are the only gods and that whatever they do is divinely right.

God deliver us from gods like those or a morality like that!

Not Quite Human

Once a great critic of literature was asked whether he considered Hamlet to have been crazy? His answer was emphatic.

“Certainly not. If he was not sane, he was not quite human; and a great writer like Shakespeare would not have been interested in a man who had lost most of his humanity.”

Well a great part of the literature of our rapidly ending era decided to stop regarding men as human. The faithless biologists declared man an animal. Evolution had produced him; death would snuff him out.

So man was presented as subhuman. Where once literature looked for heroes and immortals, it now went looking for perverts and immorals. Where once a great fictional character mounted to the heights, now he went crawling in the mud bottoms. Literature was once concerned with men as they tended to become most like God; it suddenly grew excited about men as they behaved like animals.

So we got the subhumans in "Of Mice and Men" and "The Grapes of Wrath." Faulkner and Hemingway showed us men at their moments of most revolting depravity, after they had turned away from their magnificent human heritage and had become characters in their most animal moments. The French realists thought that noble characters were silly. They preferred their characters to be as repellent and weak and shifty and dirty as possible. Sherwood Anderson found men and women most interesting when they were lumped together like eggs in a carton. He was interested in a minister of religion who was, not walking in the garden of prayer with God, but playing Peeping Tom on the village spinster. Sinclair Lewis passed by the thousands of priests and ministers who have served mankind faithfully; he preferred to walk at the side of a lustful egotist like Elmer Gantry. Erskine Caldwell roots around in the depths of the southland to find sharecroppers who gnaw raw turnips and learn their morality on the dirty floor of a disused barn.

When Is Man Manly?

Of course there still remain a few of us who think that man is most manly when he is most like Jesus, incarnate God, and woman most womanly when she turns in

repugnance from vulgarity and evil to the virtues of the greatest of all women, Mary, virgin and mother. I'm sure the reviewer in Time would find that that too is immortally funny. He no doubt thinks men typically men when they are acting like jungle tigers or tomcats on a moonlit night. He would probably consider serious and entitled to no scorn or pity or laughter the daughter of joy and the unfaithful wife.

If literature presents men and women merely as bodies from which the soul has been banished, it is animalistic literature. It is the record of beasts and brutes pretending to be human. But because that was the popular science of the mad days when all you had to do was say, "Evolution," and God vanished in an earthquake of fear, and anything from the origin of the world to the human love of a man for his wife was as clear as the waters of a stagnant marsh, that confusion became the grinding thought of a lot of modern writers too.

Too Obvious

All the confusion in the world has not however destroyed even in the mind of George Seldes or of the Time reviewer the obvious facts about right and wrong. Some things are good, and some things are bad. Some acts improve the human race, and some acts drag it down. Some conduct is worthy of a man, and some conduct we recognize as undignified, inhuman, and hence brutal and beastly.

Thus when Chesterton said that sin is as plain a fact as potatoes, he knew what he was talking about. Murder is wrong; and we still clap the murderer in prison, and in some states a murderer is hanged as unfit to live in a world of men. Lust is so

obviously evil that we see its effects in rotting bodies, in sick souls, in broken homes, in collapsed nations. Theft is the cowardly taking advantage of another's absence or weakness.

Nobody has any doubt about his reactions if someone says of him: "He has no more honesty than a horse thief; he is a cold-blooded murderer; he is a rotter who'd betray any woman; he is a liar." He feels that he has been insulted. If those things are perfectly all right and if the Code of the motion-picture industry is funny in condemning them, then a man should regard it as a compliment to be called a thief, a liar, a murderer, a roué; a woman should smile with pleasure to hear it said of herself that she choked her baby to death, stole from her roommate, slandered a guiltless friend, and possessed no shred of virtue; neither sinful man nor guilty woman should be disturbed or embarrassed.

Are they disturbed or embarrassed? You answer that by applying any of those pleasant names or charges to yourself.

Villains Are Villains

All this is so clear that we waste time when we talk with the stupid amoralists who would call murder a virtue and the moon a circle of Camembert cheese. Let's not fool ourselves. I have repeatedly quoted Joseph McCabe, renegade Franciscan friar, Catholic turned lying atheist, who in a moment of unaccustomed honesty and candor admitted that all the talk about the new morality and all the statements that good and evil do not exist were merely an effort to cancel the sixth and the ninth commandments. We know quite well that the writers who attack those two commandments find

them an annoying barrier in their siege of innocence and a nasty rebuke to their lives of beastly lust.

Borderlands

But though nobody in his right mind imagines that murder—the unjust killing of a human being—is right, still murder may not always appear as murder. One of Dumas's heroes hears a passing officer say that he thinks the hero wears an unbecoming cloak; the hero whisks out his sword; the two engage in combat; the hero spits his opponent's heart on his rapier. Splendid! The fellow insulted him, didn't he? Another of Dumas's heroes goes through an entire book revenging himself on the men who did him harm, wiping them out one by one. (Of course Ben Hur did that too—as long as he was a Jew. But there was forgiveness and not revenge in his heart once he had accepted the principles of Christ.) The young physician in "Sorrell and Son" painlessly kills his own father. "An American Tragedy" sends an unhappy young couple looking for a doctor willing to kill the unborn child in the woman's womb.

Naturally murder is wrong. But what about these other forms of killing—dueling, abortion, mercy killing, slaying for revenge? What about the killing of a wicked, unwanted wife, as in "Rebecca"?

Theft is so clearly wrong that no one needs discuss the morality of the matter. But is one sometimes allowed to take what belongs to another? The hero in "Les Miserables" was—and I mean this—quite within his rights when he took the loaf of bread. He was starving; and if he could get the bread in no other way, he had a right to steal it.

But what about the universal and complete theft advocated by the leftist writers, the theft of all our property, theft that masquerades under the smelly Red costume of communism? Kipling lauded that international theft which created British imperialism. How about the books—from "The Pit" through to the present-day novels—that present the hero as a grand person when he makes his fortune by the crimes of big business, sharp practice, market rigging, exploitation, the cornering of the markets of necessities to skyrocket prices?

Lust in Vague Light

Anyone who visits a hospital, a divorce court, an orphanage, or a burlesque house knows the rotten and corrupting force that is lust. But what about the successive polygamy—we call it divorce—that serves as the solution for so many modern novels? How is the hero going to marry the heroine unless he kills her husband (murder will of course get him into trouble with the law) or manages a divorce? And naturally enough Christ's law wouldn't apply in his case.

What about the unrestrained lust that is made possible by birth control — passion without an objective, marriage only to facilitate illicit marital relationship? Yet the majority of married characters in modern novels and dramas practice birth control, whether the author is Noel Coward or Lillian Hellman or Charles Norris.

Lust is an ugly word. But romance and youthful love and the sweet yielding to temptation and a man's and a woman's dear surrender to the joy of forbidden embrace—Well all those things are very different. So from the foul promiscuity portrayed in the cheapest of the pulps to the moonlight and

roses in "The Fountain" lust undergoes the magic of a magician and under a dozen other names turns out to be an apparently charming thing.

Two Standards

Long ago Christians condemned the double standard of morality. There was not one set of commandments for men and another set for women. Hell was for both the male and the female of the species; if Paolo and Francesca sinned, Paolo accompanied the lady of his choice to her punishment. Francesca was not the victim of a double standard of right and wrong.

In oblique travesty on the Christian single standard of virtue, which means the obligation of a man to be as good as a woman, the modern writers developed a single standard of vice, the right of a woman to be as bad as a man. So Claire Boothe presents "The Women," in which the characters are more foulmouthed and animal in instinct and predatory and ruthless than the forty thieves of Ali Baba's day. And most of America thought the play terribly funny.

Yes; the big problems of right and wrong, the obvious peaks, are clear enough to see. But around the slightly smaller problems, the lower ranges of moral issues, the clouds have gathered. Yet nature had little and art much to do with the rising of those cold, clammy, apparently impenetrable mists.

What Is Decent?

What precisely is morally right? What is decent?

Scholastic philosophy is very clear on the subject. And Scholastic philosophy may be easily defined as sanity in syllogisms. In fact the whole idea of what is right and

humanly dignified is tied up with that word decent. Scholastic philosophy spears that word and holds it up for clear inspection.

The English have a fondness for the word decent. "That's the decent thing to do," they say, or "He's a decent sort of chap," or "Wasn't it decent of him to step aside for that old fellow at the door?" Decent is a handy word and an expressive one. It suggests that the decent chap does right things, nice things, thoughtful things, dignified things, gentle things, considerate things. You feel that a decent fellow wouldn't hit a child or rob a woman of her virtue or steal from a helpless person or be cruel or rotten or greedy.

The Proper Thing

But the word decent means more than even these things suggest. It comes from a Latin word which happens also to be *decent*. *Decet*, the singular form, means literally "It's fitting, proper, becoming, the thing to do." *Virtus homini decet* means "Manly action befits a real man." In the plural the word is *decent*; and so *Virtus et prudentia duci decet* is translated "Manly action and good judgment are the proper qualities of a leader."

We wrenched the word *decent* right out of the Latin and without the change of even a letter made it one of our favorite English words. So decent means "proper, fitting, correct, the right thing to do, according to correct standards, sound, wholesome." "He's a decent fellow; these are decent clothes; that's only the decent thing to do; this is a decent book."

The word indecent took of course the exactly opposite meaning from decent. "He's positively indecent; that's an indecent out-

fit; don't read that indecent book; the play is indecent; this whole line of conduct is indecent."

The nouns taken from the adjectives are simply decency and indecency.

Befitting a Man

No human act fails to have moral values, yet at the start the words had no really direct reference to moral purity or impurity at all. That was decent which was the right thing for a man or a woman to do or be. That was indecent which was unbecoming a human being. One couldn't speak of an animal as being decent or indecent. An animal could be beastly without being in any sense indecent. If a man acted like a beast, we said, "How utterly indecent!" A decent woman drew back in repugnance from conduct that makes a woman brutal or even slightly beastly.

All this lies at the basis of any understanding of what Scholastic philosophy regards as moral, right, decent. That is good which is the right thing for human beings to do. Or that is right which is in accordance with a man's essential nature. Or those things are moral which befit a man in himself in all his relationships with all other things. Or after one has examined an action and can say, "That is the human thing to do; that is manly; that is womanly," he can add, ". . . and that is right and good."

For Example . . .

So courage is good, as are fidelity to one's wife and care of the suffering and truth-telling and the service of humanity and grateful love of God. To be a fine doctor is a moral thing, because it is decent. To be master of one's animal nature is splendid,

because it is what is expected of a man who is after all so much above mere unrestrained animals. So the defense of the weak is good, since it establishes a man in his correct relationship to his fellow men. So a prayer to God is highly moral, since it is simply the decent act of gratitude by which a son thanks his Father for the gifts he has received.

Full Manhood

Scholastic philosophy sees man in his entirety: He has a body, but he is not merely an animal; he has a soul, but he is not an angel; he has a series of essential relationships with his fellow men, but he also has unbreakable relationships with God; he has duties to the state, since he has a social nature, but he has duties to himself that no state can touch.

Every action then that builds a man up in all these relationships, that makes him more a man and less a mere body, more a social being and less a selfish maverick, more a child of God and less a relative of the animal kingdom is splendid and moral and fine—and decent.

Obviously enough we see from this what is indecent, wrong. A man receives great favors from a friend. He fails to thank him. He utterly neglects him. In fact he becomes his savage enemy. "How wrong! how indecent!" we cry. A man has received paramount favors from God. He fails to thank Him. On some silly pretext he utterly neglects Him. He becomes His foe. "How wrong! how indecent!" says the Scholastic philosopher.

For Instance . . .

A man is unfaithful to his wife. "How wrong! how indecent!" we cry. Why? Be-

cause first of all such conduct shows an inhuman lack of self-control. It imperils the future of marriage, through which alone children can be born safely into the world. It hurts the wife, who depends largely upon the man for her happiness. It adulterates the human race, as poison adulterates food. Hence the use of the word adultery, the spoiling or poisoning of the human blood stream by evil conduct.

A lie is indecent; it is against man's social nature, makes conversation untrustworthy, destroys one's faith in one's fellows. Theft is wrong, indecent. It takes advantage of another's weakness; it is a beastly manifestation of greed. Promiscuity is indecent; it is a beastly lack of restraint; it is the corruption of innocence. Murder is wrong, indecent; it is human beings living according to jungle ethics; it is the substitution of the law of claw and tooth for the law of brotherly relationship and human collaboration.

And I could continue this list indefinitely.

But this much is clear: The more one thinks about the origin of that word decent, the clearer does right conduct become. The more one studies Scholastic philosophy's standard of morality—"Conformity to the essential nature of man in all his relationships"—the more one is impressed by its magnificent clarity and force.

Still More

This is however only the beginning of Christian correctness of conduct. Since He knew that even with the best intentions in the world men and women would sometimes find it difficult to say with certainty, "This is the right thing for a man to do,"

or "This befits a decent woman," Christ came to clarify our conduct.

I should find it difficult, I frankly confess, to persuade a young couple planning divorce that that is the inhuman thing to do. The arguments are powerful, but their emotion is stronger still. Mrs. Sanger, a mistress in the art of human selfishness, has had little enough trouble persuading hot-blooded young men and young women to accept the joys and privileges of marriage and refuse to God the children who can come into the world only with their cooperation. As one young lady said to me, frankly: "I'd rather not hear the arguments against birth control. I don't want to know that it is wrong." She was finding Mrs. Sanger's code of human selfishness too convenient and easy. I often wonder when a Mrs. Sanger will arise to persuade murderers that murder is a natural impulse not to be thwarted and convince racketeers that highjacking and intimidating are really biologically necessary acts.

Christ Explains

But Christ entered into the confused moral scene and made clear those problems of morality that might otherwise have been obscure.

First of all He explained to man his essential nature and relationships:

Man is a child of God and destined for immortal life.

Man is intended for another life, one that will last forever.

Man is blessed by a Father in heaven.

Man bears to his fellow men the relationship of a brother, a neighbor.

Man should regard property as something committed for a time to his stewardship.

Man must regard life so sacredly that he keeps himself personally clean and pure and has the highest regard for marriage as the gateway of life.

Man must love and hold fast to the truth.

Man must build on love, express that love in service of his fellow travelers on earth, and fulfill his destiny.

A Better Code

Elucidating all this, Christ gave the world a code of right and wrong that is supremely beautiful, if decidedly inconvenient to the roué, the murderer, the dictator, and the thief. Not only was murder wrong, but so were exploitation and hatred and cruelty and even minor injustices.

Lust was terrible, but so were impure thoughts and divorce and the contempt for human life and anything that hindered little children from coming through marriage to His arms.

Theft was forbidden, but so were greed and extortion and love of money and lust for possessions—the aggressive war of a king even more than the nasty thievery of the pickpocket.

Between men there must be love. Between all the races, peace. Beyond nations, the kingdom of God, His Church, international in viewpoint, wide and inclusive as humanity.

I can, needless to say, touch here only the highest of the high points in the code of Christ. Do note though that in every detail that code conforms to our idea of what is humanly decent. Do realize that it lifts man to the level of the God-Man.

Above Paganism

Catholics know or should know that beyond the law which even the pagan was

able to recognize—the law which said he must not murder his friend or defraud his laborer or soil his body and endanger the future through lust—we have the higher and more splendid code of the Savior. So even though a country like ours approves divorce—against the direct teachings of Christ, who saw the horrors of universal divorce all around Him—the code that we follow is still Christ's. Hence a book that solves the lovers' problems by an easy divorce is to us immoral and indecent. A book that is based on revenge is against the sweet law of Christ's love; we can regard it only with disapproval.

So many a motion picture or play that is by the laws of the land acceptable is to us still wrong. We know what Christ taught about right and wrong. We profess that our Catholic morality is as lofty as Christ's own, for the quite simple reason that it is Christ's own. We accept Christ's viewpoint, whatever the custom of the country or the viewpoint of those who regard Christ with distaste or make a cafeteria selection of those of His teachings that they regard as palatable, easy, pleasant, convenient.

Back to the Books

After that long detour we turn back to books as books.

In any piece of literature, any production that a man with a pen in his hand or a typewriter before him turns out, we find two elements:

First there is what we call technique. That has to do with the way the man writes, his ability to devise a novel, tell a short story, construct a play, turn out in musical rhythm a poem. This in a writer is the

exact counterpart of the painter's ability to draw and lay on color.

Secondly there is the question of content. What has the writer to write about? What's the point of his story? What are his characters like, and what do they do? What is the emotion he expresses in his poem? What is he driving at in his play? What thoughts lie behind his laying out manuscript paper and saying, "Now I shall write for readers to read"?

Part One

I confess that many of the moderns have a superb mastery of technique. They know how to write. There's Hemingway for instance, who when he sends a group of murderers into a restaurant makes your skin crawl in fright. There's Shaw, who can take a trifling idea like that in "The Apple Cart" and spin it into a series of amusing acts. There's Eugene O'Neill, who can put an entire family onto a stage and make them live, suffer, sweat, and die. The list could be continued through many of the moderns—Galsworthy, Dos Passos, Saroyan, Steinbeck.

But the ability to write is only the first part of the job of making a book or constructing a play. When we were youngsters, there used to be in the amusement parks candy machines that turned out a sort of pink sugar candy. Into the machine the operator would pour a pound of sugar, and that was whipped up into endless bags of candy. The candy was lovely to look at, right enough. It sparkled in the sun like spun glass. It was as fascinating as freshly fallen snow. But it had the sustaining quality of tinted fog. And though the stuff had all the appearance of candy, even we

youngsters, as the flimsy hoax dissolved in our mouths like so much sweetened rain water, knew we'd been tricked. It looked like candy; it was in a candy bag; it was called candy—and it was so much perishable, unsubstantial star glitter.

Big Nothings

My dear old Irish grandmother—and that dates the story—used to tell of the Irish immigrant who trudged the streets looking for the biggest meal he could find, located a watermelon, bought it, ate it, lay down to sleep, awoke ravenously hungry, and then, looking at the rind of the melon, exclaimed, in chagrin and disappointment, "Sure and you were a great big nothing!"

Some time ago one of the critics commented on the rather obvious fact that Ernest Hemingway's books were sliding down a bobsled incline toward oblivion. Each book of his that appeared was worse than the one that preceded it. I wrote an open letter to Hemingway at the time, simply because Hemingway is a Catholic—of sorts. The letter was merely a reminder that the finest style in the world is wasted unless the author has something to say. And Hemingway has for a long time had nothing to say, if he had anything to say in the first place. I invited him to try his magnificent style on the solid truth and glorious beauty that are Catholic. I said that what he was writing was moonshine and nonsense and futility. Why waste a glorious style on drunks staggering from bar to bar, on the cheapest form of criminals, on men who are not entirely men and women who are less than women?

Nothing to Say

Now regrettably people who really have things to say often don't know how to say them. And people who know how to say things have nothing to say. Exactly this is often the case in the world of literature. I marvel that Kathleen Norris can continue to spin her sweet nothings into story after story. I am amazed that out of a pound of vinegar—or does vinegar always come in quarts?—Hemingway can continue to turn out novels. I have never ceased to wonder that Galsworthy could take his utterly futile people and make their frustrations and hesitations and skepticisms and weak sinings seem even slightly interesting. You sit down to many a modern book with the feeling that there should be a solid meal in it; you rise to discover that you have consumed half an ounce of spun sugar or the unfortunate Irishman's "great big nothing."

Great Content

For literature to be really great, two things are absolutely necessary: great technical skill in writing and great thought or emotional content.

Even if the author has important thought, some absolutely true idea, a really glorious emotion and yet presents it badly in his book, few indeed will read it.

If on the other hand the beautifully written book has no thought to present, if it is a study of futility, of drunks staggering soggily through life, then it is like a lovely woman's face and body possessed by an idiot brain, or a beautiful house utterly empty of family or guests.

If beyond this one of these brilliant writers turns out a grippingly constructed

play or a clever novel that is filled with evil, as is too often the case nowadays, the result is like a mansion turned over to gangsters and prostitutes, or a powerful motorcar carrying racketeers about their sinister work.

The classic comparison that has always been used for a well-written book dedicated to the presentation of evil is this: It is the beautifully carved gold cup offered to the guest—who does not know that the cup has been filled with fatal poison.

I could wish, as could we all, that more people who have worthwhile things to write knew how to write them. I could wish that those who know how to write didn't fill their books with poison or moonshine—or nothing.

How Do We Recognize Indecency?

But let's see just exactly what makes a book dangerous, wrong, indecent.

Any book is evil and indecent if it presents vice as if it were virtue. And that is vicious or indecent which is unmanly, unwomanly, unbecoming to the splendid dignity that is mankind's.

The unscrupulous critic, the man who loves to poke fun at all the decencies, will at once pick on the phrase "when it presents vice." He'll read no farther. That is what the reviewer in *Time* clearly did. That is what a thousand people who laughed at the motion pictures' effort at decency frankly did.

"So," the critic sneers, "literature can't present vice. What poppycock! That ends 'Macbeth,' a pretty messy story of murders. That puts a quietus on 'Faust,' which has lust and child murder at its heart. What are we supposed to do—present nothing and no one but canonized saints at their orisons?"

Well, my lad, the world isn't made that way. It's full of crime and vice, and literature will have to go on presenting evil, despite your codes and Christ's."

Masquerade

With the passage of time one grows patient with bad will as well as with ignorance. So I take time, as I have had to do a hundred times, to answer this stupid taunt.

Will you, I gently ask the sneerer, be good enough just this once to finish the sentence: "... when it presents vice as if it were virtue"? Of course men and women sin. Of course there are murderers and thieves and villains. Of course literature might be very dull if it never left the monastery and never pictured anyone except the Little Flower in her cloister. But there is a world of difference between "presenting vice" and "presenting vice as if it were virtue."

"Macbeth" is a splendidly moral play. Though it presents vice, it presents it as evil, punishable, and ultimately punished. "Faust" is a great human document. The Devil is a devil; the sinner is a sinner; the deceiver of innocence and the traitor to God pays with his soul for his crimes; the girl washes away in tears and sorrow the guilt of child murder.

Of Sin as Virtue

But—to pick a chestnut now mildewed and dated—along comes a novel like "The Green Hat." The theme is adultery, made charming and attractive and entirely the right thing to do in the smart stratum of society that is portrayed. Then once more there is the endless torrent of novels, from

the stinking smut magazines to the popular best sellers, in which lust is presented as charming, the sins of the flesh as entirely delightful, and adultery as a kind of glorious achievement, like the writing of a great symphony or the carving of a great statue. No need to list books of this type. Why give them the honor of a nod?

The obverse of this policy is of course the presentation of virtue as if it were vice. The girl is pure, so her purity is made to seem ridiculous. The man remains faithful to his wife, so he is very much a weakling and a fool. Honesty is clearly a stupid policy, and the honest are the world's great chumps.

Vice Rewarded

Some years ago a play presented as its leading character a school teacher. He was conscientious, good, pure, laborious, and a tired, harassed failure. By a series of tricky events he suddenly becomes a scamp, a wastrel, a roué, and as crooked as a worm's trail; and at that moment all the luck of the world enters his life, and he puts on easy living and the latest clothes from Bond Street.

Thomas Burke has a short story in which a young couple plan to sleep together the night before they marry. At the last minute they decide to remain good. In the hotel the girl is given a bed on which the sheets are damp; she catches pneumonia and dies. The immoral of the story, as expressed by the young man, is: What fools we were to be virtuous, when so-called sin would have meant her life and the continuance of our love.

All this is wrong because the play, the story take something which would harm and perhaps ruin mankind and make it a

course of approved conduct. Right now there is an effort being made to justify even the unnatural sins practiced by Oscar Wilde. One book takes up his sad vice and horrible perversions and explains them as highly artistic and in his case (and in the cases of others so inclined) entirely justified. The book fails to mention however that because of his sins Wilde died an outcast from society, with the blight of prison on his soul and a disease too fearful to describe hurrying him to his death.

Scamps Are Not Heroes

The second thing a book must not do if it is not to be indecent, immoral, unbecoming a human being is present villains as if they were heroes. Obversely it must not present heroes or good people as if they were villains.

This literary trick is so closely connected with that of presenting vice as virtue and virtue as vice that it is hard to dissociate the two. From this level of my life's climb I look back and marvel at the essential goodness of the nickel and dime novels that were forbidden fodder in our youth. Irving Cobb once wrote a stirring defense of those youthful thrillers, and rightly so. If a bandit rode through the pages of the story, he rode—and the reader knew it—to his death at the hands of an avenging posse. The hero was a hero, and villainy did not stain his plume or dishonor his six-shooter. As for the rare women who intruded into that library of youth (and we resented even the few who found their way there), they were an inspiration to the men who met them. Or if they strayed from the garden paths of life, they met punishment swiftly and surely.

Fictional Justice

Now I am not for a second implying that sinners in life always meet their just ends or that heroes are always crowned with bays. I know, as any sane man knows, that that is not the case. But when a writer deliberately sets out to make a villain seem attractive and a good man seem obnoxious, he is playing against the good of the race. He is presenting men and women in a fashion that would, if widely or even slightly followed, destroy individuals and wreck society.

Recently the motion picture "Raffles" had a revival. I have not seen any of the film versions, but in my youth I read the novel on which the film was—rather remotely, I imagine—based. It is an immoral book.

Now get this clear: Raffles was, where the ladies were concerned, always the perfect gentleman. But he was a thief; he entered houses as a respected guest only to rob them; he was an enemy of society. Yet his conduct is not merely approved but justified by his creator, and in the end he escapes punishment, and every reader is rooting for him as he dives from the ship and strikes out for land and safety.

Seducers

The case is a rather obvious one. More subtle and really dangerous is the case of the seducer who is held up as a charming, gracious fellow, who has a devil-may-care manner about him, and who preys on virtue as if the collecting of conquests were a sort of scientific expedition.

There's the case, which I have often used, of D'Artagnan in "The Three Musketeers." In the youthful days before I knew about

the Index, I used to think he was a hero. As a matter of fact he was a cold-blooded murderer who skewered his victims and then sat down to beef and beer with right good appetite. He accepted the hospitality of an honest friend and lived with the friend's wife for the course of long years. He never did an honest day's work in his life. He was a scamp and a scoundrel, brave because he knew he could handle his sword better than the other fellow could, so utterly selfish that he accepted the food and lodging of a friend and stole that friend's wife from under his nose. As a youngster I honored a villain as a hero. Dumas saw to it that I did.

Modern literature is full of similar types. The heroine who turns her back on her husband, her children, her home, her duty—and goes to the arms of love. The hero of "The Moon and Sixpence," who curses his wife and becomes a great artist in the midst of his brown mistresses in the tropics. The young people who sin gaily and thus win the reader's sympathy. The glamour girls who are selfish as cats and are made to appear irresistibly beautiful. The hero of "Rebecca," who kills his wife and whose action is utterly justified by the woman who created him for her story. The list is too, too long.

Brief Penitence

In the motion pictures of pre-Legion-of-Decency days the course of conduct for heroes and heroines was smoothed with deft hands. They were going to sin, and sin plenty, right enough. They were going to seduce and be seduced. Sin was set to get a fine, hearty play. But because the audience might in the end still remember that lust is

lust and seduction seduction, and because the state censor boards were not altogether blind and the federal laws against obscenity still on the books, the seven reels of crimson passion were canceled with a hundred and fifty feet of repentance.

The heroine, who from the standpoint of her years and opportunity had done just about all the sinning she could, found herself at dawn in the woods. The sunlight, God's dear, white sunlight, was astreaming through the whispering trees. The little birdies were all atwitter in gay innocence. She suddenly realized that she herself was dressed all in white, and that love was a pure and beautiful thing, and that she must be an inspiration to the man with whom she had been living in sin. So she told him that they must make their love right before God and man; he knelt and kissed the hem of her white robe; the sunlight formed a halo about her golden head; and you could hear ever so faintly "Hearts and Flowers" caroled by the little birdies. It was too, too touching. And of course the preceding seven thousand feet of film were all wiped out in the brief strip of repentant celluloid.

Even the smut magazines knew that this was a convenient out. They could send their characters through an orgy of sinning; but if the sinners ended up at the preacher's, why should anybody raise a howl? "I married 'em off, didn't I?" demanded the smut author.

Making Vice Attractive

All of which is shrewd defense of vice and the most arrant nonsense where human nature is concerned. For that literature, those plays, those pictures are wrong which do either of these things:

arouse in the reader or audience unwholesome emotional reactions;

incite to the imitation of vice.

Now anyone who has reached the first stage of adolescence knows that man is a very carefully balanced combination of highly explosive forces. He is, as we put it guardedly, easily aroused. And when we say he, we mean of course she too. God and nature arranged it so that certain scenes and words and ideas and episodes and emotions should result in a physiological unbalancing of the human organism. The exercise of passion would be impossible without this involuntary instinctive unbalancing. To deny the fact of this unbalancing is to deny the most common possible human experience or one's own complete humanity.

Inevitable

If in the presence of these unbalancing elements, real, fictional, or described, a person still says: "Of course they don't affect me; they leave me untouched," anyone with the slightest knowledge of our common human nature realizes that there is something most unusual about him or her. He is either a liar, a hardened criminal past the point of ordinary reactions, a saint confirmed in grace by a special act of God, or notably undeveloped. So when young people say, with calm assurance, "Oh I'm not troubled by anything I read, not even the most frank situations or the most detailed descriptions of passion or perversion," are they honest? Is what they say really true? We sincerely hope not.

So that element in literature is immoral and indecent which tends to arouse this unbalancing emotional experience in the

souls and the bodies of the readers. Certain scenes in "Anthony Adverse" for example were frank descriptions of seduction, and one cannot watch the progress of a vividly described seduction without being at least slightly seduced, mentally or emotionally. One great Catholic author in the course of a classic that I shall not mention (his other works are so remarkably fine) described in detail a Roman orgy. Clearly the men and women who were present at that orgy were emotionally excited and unbalanced; the vast majority of them, if not all of them, were aroused to a pitch of lustful desire that we call mortal sin. Anyone can see that the magnificently clear and detailed description of scenes in which the participants are aroused to lustful desires run a pretty fair chance of emotionally upsetting the reader as well. The author meant the scene to depict vice at its lowest. What he actually did was present to the minds of his readers a vicious temptation. That was indecent.

Unbalance

I remember one woman author of my acquaintance who was accustomed on occasion to write scenes which I insisted were emotionally unbalancing. Their effect was biological. The readers were inevitably excited. When I explained this to her, she replied, calmly: "I can guarantee that they never bother me in the slightest. I am bored at the idea that others are so weak." I felt apologetic, until later on her own personal conduct proved very clearly that she had lied to me. She was quite as normal as the rest of humanity. Temptations awoke in her the usual responses. She fell, and sadly.

So the mere fact that the hero repents and with the heroine ends up at the altar doesn't make a book moral or decent. If before the repentance and the happy reunion they have been taken (along with the reader of course) through vividly described temptations, through scenes of hot passion, through vice and lust and sin accurately presented, the book is immoral and indecent regardless of its end. Scenes of this sort spoiled "Gone With the Wind." They are frightfully common in the "realistic" writings. They completely spoiled for thousands of clean-minded readers "The Grapes of Wrath."

To the Pure

And to retort to all this with "To the pure all things are pure" is simple nonsense. The pure do not allow impurity to touch them; that is quite correct. They do not see sin in innocent remarks, or find double meanings in casual words, or read dirt into the actions of those around them, or see lust and passion everywhere. But they are the quickest to see that temptation is an ugly thing. They can scent from afar the approach of lust. They are embarrassed by passion in its illicit forms. They recognize vice as vice, and no mistake about it, and they want nothing to do with the thing.

Never does it happen that a filthy-minded writer fails to say, "To the pure all things are pure," when the obvious retort to that remark is, "To the dirty all things are soiled"—or will be before he gets through with them. And to imply that because a man is pure he is not subject to temptation, not subject to the same biological reactions that are common to the rest of humanity, that he is not aroused by those very things which God and nature meant to arouse him

is to talk the most arrant stuff and nonsense. The pure are pure—but normal.

We Copy

Beyond this there is the well-known human trait known as imitation. If a man invents some new method of suicide and his self-murder is publicized, a thousand to one someone else will shortly kill himself in the same way. If a criminal devises and puts into practice some new form of murder or theft or counterfeiting, the police try to keep the knowledge of it from the public. There are too many who would go and do likewise.

At first divorce was regarded as a disgraceful thing. Soon however social leaders and stage and screen stars made divorce rather common; quickly the rest of the world imitated them. Crime and vice are as readily picked up and imitated by men and women as is a new style of hairdress, a new gadget for the home, or a new piece of slang.

"Tell the Truth"

To all of which the man who wants to present realistically vice and crime and sin and perversion answers: "But the point is that all this exists. I should not be telling the truth unless I presented what people really do and the way that they do it."

So Hemingway would plead, or Faulkner, or Caldwell, or Steinbeck. So pleaded the French realists. Human nature has its elements of filth; so let's describe the filth, even if the minds that touch it are dirtied in the process. Vice exists, hence the honest writer must give vice in all its details. The people the writer is describing talk that sort of obscenity and live the lives of pigs in the sty, so the author feels he would not

be giving the picture correctly unless he recorded the people exactly as they are.

The first answer to this often-quite-honest statement of position by the realists is to agree, as I do, that there is a place for the description of sordid vice and obscene perversions. A doctor has to have in his library books that explain and describe the most disgusting social diseases. The social worker is obliged to make himself or herself acquainted with the fetid conditions under which some human beings have to live and to know exactly what goes on in the dives and hovels of big cities. A lawyer needs to know crime in detail. A specialist in nervous diseases must read up on the pathology and diseases of sex.

If Knowledge Means Cure—

But all these people intend to do something about the unpleasant things they study. The doctor hopes to cure the effects of lust; the social worker wants to correct the sad environments of people; the lawyer is getting at the roots of crime; the specialist means to cure the sexually diseased. This is a very different matter from that of dragging vice and obscenity into the popular literature of the day, books read by people who in the main can't do anything about the evil.

"Tobacco Road" for instance presents people who are probably replicas of unhappy sharecroppers; the conditions are photographically described; the language is a sound track; the vices are regrettably true to the facts. So what? So it is all put into a popular novel and then into a play, which runs for years on Broadway and across the nation. How many of the readers or audience set about improving the conditions of

the sharecroppers? And how many went to the play because they heard it was as dirty as the comedians at Minsky's down the block? How many who read "The Grapes of Wrath" have been stirred to do something for the Okies? How many read it for the thrill?

No Place Here

There is a place for a discussion of cancer; that place is a medical textbook. The evils of commercialized vice should be discussed in government reports for the use of men and women in the field of social betterment. But the details of neither cancer nor prostitution are subject for the novel or play offered to the public.

Professional people are obliged to know the things necessary for the proper fulfillment of their work. They must face disease; they must know those aspects of sin and evil which bear upon the people whose lives they touch and whose pasts they must know if they are to help shape the futures of those people. God has a way of protecting people in the line of their duty. They do not go after evil or wrong for the pleasure of it; they are not curious or in search of a thrill. They want to know evil a little as God knows it—in the hope of correcting it, driving it out of human lives.

But professional men and women and the general public are two quite different groups.

Why? First because the public in the main is in no position to do anything about either cancer or prostitution—to use a single instance.

Then because the books or plays present scenes that are revolting or the source of emotional temptations that scar the mind.

Finally because such details serve to acquaint people with words, phrases, conversations, vices, and perversions that they might otherwise never have known.

Scarred by a Book

A number of years ago a woman writer brought out a novel that treated of a form of sexual perversion among women. The book was widely read, especially by young women. The result was that this unnatural sin, attractively described, emotionally defended, became a source of temptation for young women and little girls who would otherwise never have known that the vice exists—in its few rare and unhappy victims. Too the book made wholesome, normal, innocent girls regard themselves with suspicion and actually distrust their charming friendships and wholesome affections. The book did untold harm. I don't pretend to know why the woman took that ugly theme for her subject. I do know however that it wounded and scarred innocence and young girlhood.

Selective

Quite beyond all this however literature must show the art of selection. When a man sits down to tell the story of his hero, he can't tell everything about him. There isn't paper enough in the world to hold the complete record of any one man's thoughts, words, and deeds. And how utterly dull would be a book that pretended to "tell all." All the commonplace actions of life and the dull conversations would have to be recorded, stupid word following trivial word. The result would be too paralyzing to consider.

So the author picks and chooses out of

the million possible events the ones that are significant and make the story or the play move toward its objective. The man who knows how to choose graphically and tellingly is a real author.

Camera Eye

For years the camera was regarded as highly inartistic. When the lens was turned on any object, it captured every least detail. The wart was as prominent as the characterful nose, the billboard as the mountain, the wrinkle as the strong or beautiful mouth. Precisely because the camera recorded everything without regard for significance or value, it was branded as inartistic. Not until photographers learned how to make a camera pick up only the significant did photography begin to come into its own.

Now the realist writer turns the camera of his mind on characters and scenes and records everything. The hero's belch (forgive me!) is as significant as his proposal to the heroine. The casual dirty story he tells is recorded along with his pledge of loyalty to his country.

We Know Without Hearing

Quite willingly I'll admit that sometimes the unpleasant, even the evil, thing is precisely what reveals character or lights up the scene. But every artist, painter or writer, has to select. And I maintain that many of our moderns are picking things that nobody needs be told. There was a great flurry of excitement when some of the writers suddenly began to use the little four-letter words that had formerly been scrawled on alley fences only by nasty little ragamuffins. Ring Lardner burlesqued the whole

idea when he modestly began to write hell as he-ll.

I remember when I first ran across one of these vulgarisms in a book by a famous Irishman. All it did was recall the kid in third grade who had first used the word in my hearing and was made by one of the older boys to wash his face in snow.

The use of nasty little words doesn't tell the intelligent world a thing. Everyone knows that dirty-minded people talk dirty. The words had once been confined to cheap saloons and the alley behind the barn; their appearance in literature has not enriched human knowledge, made clearer the characters who use them, or improved our language; they are unnecessary, and as such inartistic selection.

Why Hammer the Obvious?

The same thing is true of vicious actions. Vicious people act viciously; so it is not necessary to describe adultery to prove that a man is an adulterer. Anyone who read "Uncle Tom's Cabin" when it first appeared needed no detailed description to see that immorality under slavery was easy and unpleasant; the author did not insult her audience by telling them what they already knew.

I maintain that "Vanity Fair" is a far cleverer and more artistic book than "Gone With the Wind" can ever be puffed into being. Becky Sharp is the progenitor of Scarlett O'Hara and will live in literature when Scarlett is restored to correct spelling and is once more only a color and O'Hara only the name of the local shortstop. Yet Thackeray let us know how ruthless and immoral Becky was without once saying: "Now since I give my readers credit for

no imagination or power of deduction, I shall show you Becky misbehaving with Lord Stein." He was a great writer. He didn't beat the loud gong of the obvious.

The pirates in "Treasure Island" will be alive when "Anthony Adverse" and his crew of picaroons are forgotten. Perhaps, come to think of it, they are already forgotten. Yet Stevenson did not present in lurid detail the terrible actions of his villains. A child can read "Treasure Island" and not be hurt; an adult would know exactly the kind of conduct he could expect from that band of ruffians who with pieces of eight in their breeches did the rounds of a seaport town.

Distracting

It is the experience of honest critics that dirt in books serves to spoil the interest in books. I confess quite frankly that certain books have lived despite their dirt; a pitiful few have lived because of their dirt.

Dirt in a book—let's say "The Grapes of Wrath"—produces either of two reactions.

The clean-minded reader running into the dirt has the feeling: "How unnecessary! how distracting!" The fastidious reader lays the book aside unread, after he has met the dirt—as I know one eminent surgeon did with that particular book. If he feels he should read it for its more serious message, the reader finishes it, but he is continually annoyed by the dirt, as a man would be if he saw smut scrawled on a beautiful wall surrounding an impressive house.

The dirty-minded reader picks up the book because he has heard it is dirty. He reads the dirt and is bored by those parts that the author meant to be taken seriously. He feels cheated because there is not more

filth. That the book also has a serious purpose means nothing to him.

The clean-minded reader runs into the dirt and is distracted and annoyed. The dirty-minded reader runs into the serious sections of the book and feels bored and cheated of good, frank pornography.

Less a Man

Anyway it is more than clear that once a writer becomes predominately interested in the physical functions that man shares with animals he ceases to be interested in the heart and soul that make a man a human being. If he spices his book with sex, he presents pure love as flat and insipid. He becomes so engrossed with the operations of man the animal that he loses all interest in the aspirations of man the son of God.

All "realists" tend to go downgrade. Remarkably their first books are usually their best.

Acceptable to All

We must never forget that the great classics have had a way of being acceptable for all. "David Copperfield" could have been as sordid as anything by Caldwell; it isn't sordid. It would not be great literature if it were sordid. "The Tempest" could have been a highly sexed story, with Caliban a pervert; Shakespeare knew better. Only the student of literature reads the rather sordid "The Rape of Lucrece"; all the world reads "As You Like It." What Poe could have done with gutter language and alley conduct if he had wanted to! He didn't want to, and his stories belong to all the world.

Sometimes it will happen that a writer wants to put into fictional form facts which

were never meant for adolescents, much less for children. He is dealing with some mature problem, and he feels that a mature reader will in no sense be harmed by his story.

But that is not the attitude of most modern writers. They write for the general public. One journalist who puts his journalese into bound volumes wrote the story of a great criminal lawyer. Out of the record of the man he took a particularly horrible taxicab story of lust and ugly death. The incident belonged in a law-case book; it was flung out for all the world to read—for any child can pick up a book from the public or the lending library.

Not for All

If only mature people were permitted mature books, then many of our modern books would be justified, as are books on pathology and nervous disorders, the private lives of criminals and the case records of perverts. But as long as these books are made accessible to all, as long as they are sold to anyone, as long as they are offered as public entertainment and casual reading to irresponsible readers . . .

Anyone with a sense of responsibility for human conduct—his own, young people's, and any others'—can finish that sentence in terms of high moral obligation.

Why Not Decent?

The Catholic finds the whole question of indecency in literature most annoying and perhaps much too much emphasized—a little like the discussing of humanity in terms of the criminal element and life in terms of prostitutes and gangsters' "molls." But

as long as men will write dirt for the sake of dirt, we have to be in a position to protect ourselves and others. We believe that we, who clearly know right from wrong and good from bad, must be willing to explain to a confused and foggy public why some books are decent and some utterly indecent, some a glory to mankind and some the source and manifestation of human depravity.

And even beyond that we Catholics are interested in literature that presents man, not as the close kin of the brute, the beast, but as the brother of the Son of God.

Literature can be catholic with a small c; such are all those glorious books which, whether written by pagans, Jews, or Christians, have helped man climb higher and higher in ideals and conduct and principles and practice.

Literature can be Catholic with a capital C. Such is the great body of books which—from St. Matthew down to Maritain, from the *Magnificat* of Mary, the first Catholic poet, to the last lovely sonnet of a nun who sings the love of Christ—add to basic decency and goodness the glorious principles and ideals and truth and beauty that are Christ's.

We are sorry that there are men who sell dirt and poison between covers.

We are happy in the ever-increasing army of authors who use the great literary forms to present the eternal message of peace on earth to men of good will.

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