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What's It Got To Do With Me?

Stephen C. Holder

In his useful 1966 book, *Mass Entertainment* (New Haven), Harold Mendelsohn writes an accurate description of Americans' use of literature to respond to the events of our world: "Man repairs the deficiencies in his life and experiences by creating and enjoying art, music, drama, poetry and fiction – and contemporaneously–mass entertainment"(Mendelsohn, 91).

Writing and literature can do more than reflect the concerns of a culture, they function as living parts of the culture they reflect. They provide an avenue, with clearly understood directions, for traveling to new understandings of the things that challenge and bewilder us. Intellectually and cathartically, they increase our understanding of the possibilities of the human experience. The road is constantly familiar, constantly different. Literature and writing, by virtue of their various and recognizable forms, provide a context, an understood haven in which to explore that which is not understood.

For that reason, the study of literature must always be concerned to some degree with the context of the world and society in which it was written. Looking backward in time, we can see those contextual relationships with clarity. We understand, for example, why Ezra Pound called his world "an old bitch gone in the teeth, a botched civilization," in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." We understand the economic, sociological, technological and political issues of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is axiomatic that we march into the present armed with the knowledge of our ancestors, but that knowl-

edge may not be a part of our own context.

The apparent disaffectedness of young people following the awful events of 9/11 was something of a shock to many long-time teachers, who understood the context all too well, themselves. But young people haven't the context that their teachers have. Those of us who remember our own fifth-grade class huddled in the hallway, faces to the wall, arms covering our heads during air-raid drills, know well the fear of the instant destruction of our world. Those of us whose parents fought, and perhaps died, in World War II or Korea, or who were alive during the events of Viet Nam, had a context for the day that was 9/11. But today's young people are the first generation in American history whose parents didn't at least carry liability for military draft. Even the immediate knowledge of their parents, passed on to them, could not offer a context for 9/11.

Students today are certainly no less serious than we ever were in the past. They are no less hard-working. They are no less intelligent; in fact, they have much more information at their disposal than any generation in the past. If anything, they suffer from sensory overload. The simple act of reading one issue of any big city daily newspaper, cover to cover, presents one with more information to deal with than he would have had to process in an entire lifetime if he lived when Christ was said to walk the earth. The average child today will spend more hours watching television before he enters school than he will spend in classrooms in

his lifetime; in fact, the average American will have watched nine years (made up of 24-hour viewing days!) by the time he reaches age 65. The pure speed and the attendant anonymity of today's life, however, produces a coolness toward the content of that life, a detachment from its context. Indeed, the so-called American context may no longer be a shared experience. Today, at least a generation removed from the context of ambush, and after decades of Keynesian economics and guns- and-butter wars, the apparent disaffectedness of our youth regarding 9/11 should come as no surprise.

Not to lose track of the point, however, we should note that young people's disaffectedness is apparent. The fact is, of course, that 9/11 has suddenly, and permanently, become part of their world. Their problem, in the absence of an immediate and personal context, is how to deal with this fact. Their issue is probably not *whether* they should care, but *how* they should care, and how they should find the means of expression for understanding and caring about an event for which they are totally unprepared. Is this merely another in the myriad events by which their senses are daily bombarded on television and the internet? Where should it rank in their priorities? What relationship does this event have to their lives? They watch, over and over, planes flying into and through the World Trade Center

towers; what does it mean? How will they find out? The "official" narrators Peter Jennings and Tom Brokaw interpret for them (from their own generational context), but where is the proof that the interpretation is valid? And, perhaps most important in students' fast, anonymous world, how can they know feelings they have not expressed, themselves?

It is not news to say that writing is thinking, writing is knowing, writing is locating a place from which to engage in still more thinking and knowing. Writing is making sense of the senseless, making the invisible visible. Reading is understanding, as Matthew Arnold said, that which is thought and known. Teachers of writing and literature are in the business of helping students to understand more about the possibilities of the human experience. Writers, in Henry James' terms, have the obligation to see life better than their peers; they should try to be those "on whom nothing is lost." Our students may not become an Arnold or James, but their obligations as writers are essentially the same, especially in the time of 9/11 when we are reminded once again of the fragility and heroism of our life.

About the Author

Stephen C. Holder is Chair of the Department of English Language and Literature at Central Michigan University, where he also teaches courses in American Literature.