

THE PROFANE PARADIGM

by

Chuck Nicholas

"OK class, today I'm going to give you several options on the educational smorgasbord to study. As part of your liberal arts high school education and our relentless pursuit of real world knowledge, (not some Pollyannish 50's Ozzie and Harriet perspective on life), we are going to study literature with some elements that may shock you. Now I realize that some of you have lived rather cloistered lives and that your parents might not approve of the tack that we are taking in this course, but I want to assure you that what we are doing is in your best interest. You are gaining from the insights of individuals who don't look at life through a sugar-coated prism of the way they want life to be. You are being enriched by exposure to viewpoints that are more adult, liberal, and--consequently--more enlightened. In a multicultural, heterogeneous, ever-evolving society, tolerance is the operative term when it comes to stimulating young minds. As we forge into this new vista, we must set aside any preconceived religious, moral, and/or ethical judgmental notions about appropriateness; and you must trust my judgment in exposing you to what I regard as the *sine quon non* of cutting edge literature. Class, today you must choose one of three options for discussion.

Option One deals with human sexuality, more particularly the development of heterosexuality out of a primal sense of bestiality.

Option Two deals with the need for homosexual lovers to be accepted into the religious community and the family and expose those who disagree on religious grounds as being fools.

Option Three deals (in the context of Poetry) with the explicit details of a young woman wanting to be raped, getting raped, and her enjoyment of it.

From where did these options come?

A. Just run-of-the-mill TV fare on the family channel?

B. The introduction by an aspiring teacher to a local school board justifying the merits of a new course entitled Bestiality, Human Sexuality Options, & Blasphemy 101?

C. Was listed from the guidance counselor's course description manual as he/she advised prospective parents of the depth and breadth of curricular offerings at this school?

D. Taken from a right wing zealot's propaganda about what is wrong with our seriously underfunded, overcrowded, but humanistic public school system?

E. Or just typical of three types of entries at a recent speech tournament to which my religiously educated ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students were exposed.

Ah, yes, you say, circle the wagons! Red Alert! Call the ACLU and Norman Lear and People for the American Way. The Nazi book-banning/burning censors of the far right are on the loose! Mobilize the troops, the "funnymentalists" are on the rampage again, attempting to enforce their Puritanical morality on the rest of humanity. When will they ever learn?

If you see this differently you may write your own editorial view for the *Rostrum*.

Don't we live in a "free" country? Isn't it a basic postulate of a liberal arts education to teach young minds about the marketplace of ideas and the free flowing of ideas? Truth and error compete for our attention, and as rational decisionmakers in a democracy we must strive to give our students as broad a knowledge base possible, correct? Self-appointed, smug and "righteous" gatekeepers of the truth have no right to act as arbiters of what is "acceptable or unacceptable" for my students, correct? No one knows better than I do (as the Aristotelian philosopher/teacher/King) what is appropriate for my students.

Let's be honest with ourselves. Where else in the "real world" could we have our students perform these kind of pieces with potentially offensive and perhaps profane elements?

Would we, as part of a general school assembly to highlight what forensics is

about perform them for the entire student body?

Would we as part of an effort to inform the local school board about what we do have the students perform these types of pieces and then ask the board for money to go to Nationals?

Or better still, would we, at the end-of-the-year forensic supper for which our parents provide a potluck supper, let our parents see and hear them?

How about performing the "rape piece" at a local NOW rally? Such a thing certainly fails the political correctness test.

How about this "solution": One coach told me that "we have our parent cuttings with most of the expletives and objectionable elements removed, and we have our separate competitive cuttings with the really good stuff left intact."

Would support for the forensic community arguably be enhanced if more parents, principals, board members, and taxpayers knew that their tacit silence about what students are performing and winning not only extolled lifestyles and habits which moral people have argued as objectionable, but were sexually explicit, racist, sexist, full of scatological references, and openly anti-religious? Is the code of silence that pervades the forensic community about the explicit and profane nature of many winning forensic pieces justifiable in a pluralistic society?

Is it appropriate for freshmen and sophomores to be bombarded with suggestive sexual references in the framework of competitive speaking in a day when, as we strive to be politically correct, we castigate racially and sexually discriminatory speech. Is it right to permit students to communicate in the context of a forensic cutting words that in normal conversational discourse would result in school discipline? Irony of ironies, most schools openly display a code of expected behavior and lists among its most egregious offenses profanity and vulgarity.

Certainly, individuals in America are entitled to their viewpoints, as anti-religious, as anti-conservative, and as offensive as the law and society will allow. Granted, our

heterogeneous and diverse society has a multiplicity of viewpoints about life, and I can't expect others to reflect a more positive view of humankind than is generally reflected in dramatic interpretation. Is the material that we are encouraging and/or allowing our students to perform capable of standing up to the public scrutiny test? Or is it our dirty little secret? Are we subtly undermining the influence of the school administration and the school board by permitting our students to use language and/or describe situations that even a Supreme Court nominee might blush about?

Ironically, on our forensic circuit, I know of no coach who gives *carte blanche* to students to do whatever literature that they want. My students haven't heard stories by pornographic authors. Instead, they hear current and popular authors who resort to verbal crudities and explicit gratuitous dialogue for its shock value. And these competitors, are often judged by college students (out to impress us with their new found broad-mindedness) who laugh heartily at the double entendres and the devi-

ance described, and they award the "adult" cuttings higher placement. Sounds like sour grapes, eh?

Rewarding students for speaking in a manner that many in society find objectionable and unacceptable in real discourse should be unconscionable. Since we are liberal arts educators in the marketplace of ideas, we must strive to teach our students to communicate effectively, as educated well mannered citizens. Allowing them to wallow in the gutters of vulgarity and/or exposing them to the adult peep shows in the marketplace of ideas is not the role that I envision as their teacher/guide. Just as parents make choices for the learning child, I think we need to take a more proactive role in literature selection and say that some material is not appropriate for high school competition.

As I turn the searchlight of public discourse upon this rather weighty topic, I am left with few options. I can't stop students from coming to the local, regional, and/or district tournament with interpretative pieces that highlight fantasies about sexual

organs or are filled with anti-religious profanity. I can and will no longer permit my students to compete interpretative events in which the profane paradigm is the norm. I will no longer permit my judges to sit and evaluate these same events. I must do what I can to encourage students and coaches to perform literature without the objectionable elements. Perhaps a letter to the editor of the local paper or to the school principal of the school that is constantly pushing the edge of the envelope would be a solution. Perhaps, as a last resort, we shall go only to tournaments in which the host schools insist that a modicum of propriety be the rule in competitive speaking.

Plato said, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." As we examine our own philosophy of literature, I hope and pray that our tacit silence does not case us into the profane paradigm.

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