

Miss Elsa Nelson, English Department Chairman

'Keep the Sense of Wonder'

In the beginning there were no English courses. In fact, the English language is barely a thousand years old. As I understand it, anything we call a "course" always began as a response to a life question. I suspect math was invented to deal with questions like "How many sheep drowned in the flood?" or "Can we reach the river by sundown?" or "When will the rains come again?" The study of language was invented by scouts meeting strangers and elders telling stories to inform the next generation, and by lovers expressing their affection or their outrage. And so it is with any course of study. It represents a particular dimension of human problem-solving and invention throughout history.

In the 20th century on the planet Earth, a shift is taking place in our ways of knowing. Memorizing data can play only a minor role in a time of information explosions. The key today is a way to know the mind of another and methodologies to participate in very complex problem-solving. High school English courses demonstrate the methods of the writer, the poet, the journalist, the dramatist, the story-teller, the interpreter, the critic, and the researcher. They require that, at times, every student play the role of teacher, evaluator, director, or editor. The success of a course then must be seen in relation to an increase of student skills in the arena of language arts. The objective is to equip the students with methodologies which will serve as creative modes for excellent thinking and communication.

To me, the wonder of studying literature goes beyond a method of literary analysis or knowing how Othello acted. To read is to

establish a dialogue, to travel to a distant time or place, to be invited by ancestors to come and see. Countless versions of the past and the future are available to the person who reads. Every time we study a new author or literary form we push back the boundaries of our universe. We add another representative to what I call "the council of advisors." Whenever we finish a book, we decide whether the author or any of the characters will be seated on the council, whether they will continue to have a say. Sometimes we banish a member because he no longer speaks in a helpful way. In my senior year of high school, I decided to banish Robert Frost for ten years in order to limit my propensity to escape from the urban world. He kept a back row seat anyway. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" is too deeply etched in my consciousness to be dismissed. But this year, after some distance was established, Frost was invited back. Does that make sense to you? Ask yourself if there are any Asian writers on your council. Or youth. Or industrialists. Or ancient fathers. If all your advisors are twentieth-century westerners, you have tuned out needed resources. That's one way to decide what to read next. Where are the empty seats in your council?

Every time we write, we construct a message. That message has an intended audience. It is a bit amazing that the thoughts in my head can get into your head just by my making some marks you can see. Every writing course that you take is an occasion to explore the power of writing as a medium of communication. You will work to develop skills and methods which will allow you to take what you know and share



it, or perhaps to find ways to simply state a problem so that others can tell you what they know about it. Every time I try to compose a 21-word night letter I am impressed with how unskilled a writer I am, but when a poem takes form or a character begins to live, there's hardly time enough to get it all written.

Next semester, you will have fourteen courses to choose from. A few are required; a few have special prerequisites. The rest are generally available. Which course you take depends on past work, present levels of skills, and future plans for college or career. You should also consider your unique interests. Next semester the English department will provide students and parents with some very definite guidelines for next year's scheduling. If you have a question that requires a more immediate answer, check with the guidance office or come see me. And, by all means, keep the sense of wonder.