

# LITERARY CRITICISM BY college english majors: post world war two fiction

## The Conference for English Majors

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For departments of English in the private colleges of Minnesota, one of the highlights of the year has been the annual Conference for English Majors. Not only has this event proved to be an effective stimulus for literary scholarship by undergraduates, but it has also been influential in promoting cooperation among the department faculties.

Begun by Sister M. Joselyn, then chairman of the Department of English at the College of St. Scholastica, the Conference for English Majors had its first meeting in December 1955 on the Duluth campus. Eight colleges were represented, with two students from each college presenting papers on some literary topic. Since then the conference has been held annually in the spring of each year, with sessions usually running from early afternoon to a luncheon the following day.

Basic in the format of the conference have been student papers--generally two from each college participating. Sometimes there have been panel discussions or small group discussions of specific works. A lecture by a prominent literary scholar--Frederick Hoffman, Richard Ellmann, Allen Tate, among others--has generally been a part of the program.

The conference has not been the product of a formal organization. The host colleges have been free to select the topic and the dates of the conference and to make any specific arrangements desired. Topics have ranged from the more general--Modern Man in His Literature, The Victorian Novel, and Modern European Drama--to those concentrating on one author--Shakespeare, Joyce, Conrad, Yeats, Swift, Faulkner.

The thirteenth annual conference, at which the papers printed in this issue were read, was sponsored by Carleton and St. Olaf colleges last February 1968. The topic of the meeting was Post World War II Fiction. Twenty-five papers were given by English majors. A panel discussion by four students from Gustavus Adolphus College on John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor was followed by group discussions of the novel. Professor Carl Bode, University of Maryland, spoke on "Literature without Tears" at the evening banquet.

Concordia College, Moorhead, was the host at the fourteenth conference in February 1969. Papers and discussions centered on Post World War II Poetry, concentrating on Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsburg, John Berryman, James Dickey, Denise Levertov, and Brother Antoninus. Papers from this

most recent conference will be printed subsequently in the M E J.

J. P. DONLEAVY'S SEBASTIAN DANGERFIELD AND SAMUEL S:

QUESTION AND ANSWER

by Richard E. Dana, Macalester College

Saul Bellow, in a lecture on recent American fiction, (Recent American Fiction. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963. P. 10.) asserted that "modern literature is not satisfied simply to dismiss a romantic, outmoded conception of the Self. In a spirit of deepest vengefulness it curses it. It hates it. It rends it, annihilates it. I would rather have the maddest chaos it can invoke than a conception of life it has found false." J. P. Donleavy's novels The Ginger Man (All references to The Ginger Man are based on the Berkley Medallion Books edition, 1965.) and The Saddest Summer of Samuel S (All references to The Saddest Summer of Samuel S. are based on the Dell Paperback edition, 1967.) take part quite vigorously in this destruction of the old order. Donleavy's attacks need not be read as sheer destruction, however. If in The Ginger Man Donleavy is questioning the values, the realities of life as we accept them, then in Samuel S he confronts his earlier charges by showing that the nihilistic attitudes of Sebastian Dangerfield are not a satisfactory alternative.

The Ginger Man is the story of one Sebastian Dangerfield, an American ex-G.I. living in Dublin and supposedly working for a law degree at Trinity College. He is married to an English girl, Marion and has a daughter, Felicity. Far from concentrating on his degree work, however, Danger devotes his life to drinking and seduction. He is waiting for his father to die so he will come into his inheritance, and he finds enough money to lead his roguish life by eluding creditors, borrowing from friends, hocking other people's property and stealing the coins his wife has set aside for the baby's milk.

The effect of the novel is wickedly comic, but never glamorous. Although Danger never really attempts to become successful, he does at times, desire to be wealthy, comfortable, influential, and respectable. Looking for the future, but never preparing for it, Danger tells his wife that "when we get our hose in the West with Kerry cattle out on the hills sucking up the grass and I'm Dangerfield K. C., things will be fine again." (P. 48.) Donleavy allows his hero to sing a little poem at the end of each section, and these poems are "Usually a sardonic commentary on the futility of whatever action may have preceded it." (Ithab Hassan, Radical Innocence. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961. P. 199.)