HAMBURGER,LIT AND COCA-COLA

What I would like to do today is begin by talking a little while about something I had on my mind, but still remains unspoken, including a few words about my next to the last book "Freaks" and the book that will probably be called "What Was Literature". After I finish talking about those things for a short time I'd like to open the floor up for questions because, I know, two or three people have told me already they have questions which they'd want to ask, and I'm sure some of the rest of you have questions you have asked before and have thought I have not adequately answered.

So, what I'd like to begin by doing is a very simple thing: I'd like to tell you what I think criticism is. I've accepted to define in various ways what literature is, and last night several people attempted to define what they thought Poetry was, but nobody said, including me, what he thought Literary Criticism was. And I'll tell you what I think, so that you will, in retrospect, begin to understand better what I've been doing and trying to do. I believe that Literary Criticism is a form of Literature. Literary criticism is not a kind of amateur philosophy; Literary Criticism is not a kind of science, even humanist science, but Literary Criticism is a sub-genre of Literature. Sometimes it is difficult to say whether they are, for instance, novels or works of Literary Criticism. . . In James Joyce's Ulysses, which was already mentioned in this course, in one of our sessions here, appears one of the best criticisms of Shakespeare ever written, put into the mouth of a fictional character called Stephan Dedalus, and after Dedalus has expanded his whole theory on Shakespeare, some_ body inside the book says, "Do you really believe that;" and he says, "No". I would really like that somebody, when I finish talking, would play Devil's advocate and would raise up to say, "Do you really believe that;" And I'd say "No" and then I would turn around and say that by "No" I mean "Yes". I mean when we can put literary criticism as a form of literature

we are permitted to be ambiguous, ambivalent and ironic. I consider my biggest book "Love and Death in The American Novel" to be a really and truly gothic novel about American Literature. And I was once asked many years later to write a review of my own book as if I were a literary critic and I said anybody that does not know that this must be judged as a gothic novel with compounding interlude does not really understand it.

What literary criticism attempts to do is to create a myth of literature, a myth of the novel in the nineteenth century, a myth of American Literature from its beginning to the year 2001. You can write about the future too, if you make it. Other poem writers, imaginative writers of myths of love and death, and then the critics create a kind of secondary myth other than the other myths of life and death. As I look back on my primary attempt in my life as a critic it seems to me it was to create an overarching myth of American Literature,particularly of the American novel. And as the die creating a myth of the American novel to create a myth of the meaning of the American Character and destiny as reflected in the novel. But in the past decade, I guess,I'd have to say at least for the past ten years,it has occured to me that in all my earlier works I have attempted to create a myth of pattern, a kind of a typical picture of American fiction, American destiny,and American character using too narrowa range of material. It seems to me that I, because I've been raised in the United Academy, and I've been in and out of the University most of my life (I first entered in the University in the year 1934 and I'm still in the University as we approach the year 1984, and I expect I'll be in it this year), as a matter of fact, in September of this year I'll celebrate the fortieth anniversary of my career as a teacher at the University. I taught my first class in the University in 1939; I loved teaching in the University. The only thing that ever took me out of the University for a period of four or five years was the Great War which tore the world apart

and when it was over I went back to the University again). I think I have lived the most blessed of lives. The one thing I love best in the world is to talk about books to people who hope fully love those books. If I was paid not to talk about those books. I'd go into the catacumbs and secretly gather an under ground community and talk about them. But, you know, sometimes I'm ashamed to admit that people pay me for doing what I love to do. I blush when I look at my salary.

On the other hand, being in the University has had some ne gative effects on me. Being in the University brain-washed me into an eletist approach to literature, led me to believe that the only books worthy making a myth about, the only American books wor thy including in a survey which attempted to understand the cha racter and destiny were okayed books, high literature, "Belle let tres", the kind of books that were just appreciated by a very few people and could only really be understood by PHDs in English lite rature working over them very carefully in classes. I've decided that I was falsifying the American imagination, the American charac ter, the american destiny, by thinking that one could talk about American only by talking about Melville, Hawthorne, Henry James and ignoring - let's say - you pick the books as the one I keep talking about "Gone with the Wind". This would be like thinking you could talk about American without talking about Mc Donald's ham burgers and coca-cola which I, myself, consider two of the great test cultural inventions of the twentieth century. The real mea ning of coca-cola and Mc Donald's hamburger is the real meaning of ready-made clothes and popular literature. It eliminates class distinctions and traditional class stratified society in which you can tell the gentleman from the ordinary worker or farmer by what he chose to eat or drink. There are some countries in the world where polite rich well-educated people drink wine and only poor people drink beer, but everybody drinks coca-cola. There are some places in the world where some people eat only some kinds of dishes but everybody eats Mc Donald's hamburger and Kentucky's fried chicken. Nobody in Japan in the young generation eats sukia ki anymore. They eat Kentucky fried chicken and

Mac Donald's hamburger and this threatens the old generation.

Another great American invention which eliminates class distinctions is ready-made clothing which could mean that people who wore elegant clothing were people who could afford to hire elegant dress makers to make them dressess, and other people who wore hand me downs or slopped together clothing but dresses that you can take of the rack, make it impossible to tell the lady from the woman, the gentleman from the man.

In the same way, popular literature, popular TV, (once we talk of literature you have to include television and movies,as well as printing) make it impossible to make that kind of class distinction which was inculcated into me in the University,and I have decided, at this point of my career that from now on, when I write about American imagination as expressed in fiction, I'll talk about high literature and low literature.

As a matter of fact, it occured to me that I had been lying to myself all my life in my treatment of the novel. Because the novel, it seems to me, is per se a form of popular literature.

The novel, wherever it exists in the world, is a form of popular literature more like movies and television, than verse, drama or traditional epic. In common with all forms of popular literature, the novel is influenced by the development in technology. It's more the product of advances in technology than it is of the desire of the individual geniuses. You think the first form of mass production in the Western world was (as you are doubtless all aware) the printing press. The first feed of mass production machinery in the Western World was the printing press of movable type. And the novel was the first form that was writthen for the printing press. Not that it was invented before and came to be printed. Nor was it invented for the manuscript and came to be printed. Not that it belonged to the oral tradition and came to be printed, but that it was made to be printed, mass printed, mass marked for mass audience. And it recently occured to me that one could only understand the novel if he was willing to put it in the context not of traditional high literature, but in the context of popular literature, popular film, popular radio, TV, records, etc. though in my

newest work I attempted to expand my range look, the real truth is that I could never stay away from popular literature). If you read "Love and Death in the American Novel", you will discover that I talked about lots of popular books which I pretended to despise. I get the man, I mention him, but then I say unkind, snobbish and condescending things about him in order to justify not including him.

Now I talk about them shamelessly, allowing my love for it. But what follows from it are two things: If I am interested in extending the boundaries of literature to exclude popular low literature (what I prefer to call majority literature, as opposede to minority l literature), if I'm interested in doing it, and if, on the other hand, I think of the art of the critic as being a form of literature, this means that I should, at this point of my career be dedicating myself to writing pop criticism. I want to find a way in which one can write criticism which will reach a large number of people. I suspect I'm pretty limited. One is never going to write any critical work, no matter who he is, which is going to move the same number of people that are moved by a popular television program or a popular film or even a popular novel. But, at least, I don't want to write criticism which is going to be read only by academic colleagues.

As you know, most criticism now, in the U.S. and the Western World in general, and the whole world, I guess, is produced by people who are themselves in university departments and they do their writing for a fairly large number of fellow academics and whose words are produced by highly idolized experts that exist in the whole world in their field, who read their work in order to find what is wrong in it and put it down. Through with all that. I don't want to write about Mark Twain to the three experts of Mark Twain. I want to write to about as many as there are people who read Mark Twain as I can possibly get to. And at one point it occured to me that in order to get a broader audi-ce , it seems to me that I ought to extend the range of things that I wrote about to include not only pop literature as well as high literature, but to include pop forms which have nothing to do with books at all. It occured to me,

at one point, that it ought to be possible to write about the things which interested me all of my life: myth, alienation, the figure of the stranger,the figure of the outcast, the figure of the outsider - by going outside of literature. In the earlier part of my career I've written mostly about outsiders (my myth of America was essentially about outsiders), about American Indians, about American blacks, about American jews, about outcast, about criminals, refugees and rebels and so forth. And I thought if I could only find an image of the outcast, the outsider in society, no longer the stranger in Shakespeare, the stranger in Melvile, the stranger even in Mark Twain. But if I could find a figure who represented absolute alienation, the limits of human poor people who had never even read a book of any kind in their lives, hardly even had a chance of reaching a broader audience than I ever reached. And it occured to me that there existed such a figure in the popular imagination who sometimes appears in books, who has often been painted, who has sometimes been photographed, about whom movies have been made, who is the subject of comic books and that is shown in one of the greatest of all traditional popular poems - The Circus - which more people have seen than have ever read any kind of book, and I thought that if I could touch a theory like that (with all living, human abnormalities) in a book which was not just a book in print but a book which was both iconic and in print, a book with pictures, not an illustrated book, but a book in which the pictures were as important as the written text, a book with two texts. And I did that of course. I published it two years ago. When the idea of the book came to me I thought, six months, a year, I'll have the book written. Five and a half years later, I look up and I was barely coming out of the whole thing. The book is called Freaks. The full title of the book is Freak: Myth and Images of the Secret Self. Freaks, myth and images. . . And I wrote a book which is about how we people who are able to think about ourselves as being normal, (in large part because we call somebody else a freak - right?) went to a freak show and watched an extraordinary film which was made about

freaks, by a man called Browning, in the early 1930's on the U.S. And when we look at the Freaks, on the other hand, we see those freaks as representatives of outsiders, strangers, and we say to ouselves: "Thank God that is not me". But then people are hurt, developing the suspicion that maybe I am a freak too,only nobody knows it. I'm sure that all of you, when you were children, specially when we were adolescents thought of ourselves as being freaks. You looked at your friends and you said: "I feel skinny, I'm too fat. My breasts are too big. My breasts are too small, my feet are too big. my feet are too small, I'm too hairy, I'm not hairy enogh. Whatever it is, somehow, there is some thing wrong with me. Everybody else is normal, I'm the freak,freak, freak.

. . . I got a letter once from a librarian in Filadelfia,who wrote me that she had put Freaks out, in a window, and a bunch of eight to ten years old black boys came every day and begged her to turn to the next page, and the next page, and the next, until they'd gone through the whole book. For the first time in my life, somebody has approached me about the possibility of making a movie of the book, a documentary film. So I had the chance, somehow, of at last breaking out of the restricted au dience to which I have been bound for so long.

Leave me a word to say about my next book. It is called What Was Literature, and from what I have said so far, you can gather very quickly what I'll be doing in the book.

In this book I will be arguing that the definition of lite rature which most of us entertain and which all departmens of literature and all the universities of the world obey, is that what is taught in the departments of literature, is literature. But what is taught in departments of literature? Literature. Circular definition, right: It goes round and round.(. . .)

Before you can call yourself an educated person (that's what we tell our students of American and English Literature),you are required to have read Shakespeare, Milton, or whatever. And you're required to have read Melville, Hawthorn, and Mark Twain, but as soon as books are defined, they are actually

betrayed. A book should be chosen with love, not imposed to the students. When you define certain books to the students as obligations, then they sneak off and read other books for plea sure or perhaps they read no books for the pleasure. Instead they go off to the movies In 1968 when the students at the Sorbonne revolted, when they weren't demonstrating on the streets or closing down the Odeon, the center of the high culture in the theater, they were sneaking off into the side streets to see old Humphrey Bogart movie pictures because this was the culture which moved them as literature was supposed to move them. But there is a kind of traditional distinction between what the French once called the para-literature - Tarzan of the Apes, Wizzard of Oz, Gone with the Wind, and the other real literature; or literature and junk; literature and mere entertainment; literature and crap. One thought as elevating, enobling in some ways and the other thought as degrading, and if anybody in the university reads (you know, of the old type of professors of literature) detective stories or science fiction or pornography, he reads it as a secret file. He sneaks off and closes the door of his office and he pulls down the shade and he whips out a comic book. . .

It seems to me that this comes fundamentally to a distinc_ tion between that literature which could break multitudes, the majority, light, relighting, responsive and that literature which can be appreciated by a few highly trained chosen few. It is, therefore, a distinction which is no more viable in mass so ciety. I don't care whether that society be a capitalist society or a communist society, or anything in between. High literature and low literature is a kind of hierarchy which is analog to and pegged to class distinction. And in a democratic society all literature must be considered on the same level. We cannot per se (certainly one thing that we have no right to) say that any genre is per se mash, junk. There are some people who will say: "All western stories are junk", "All science fiction is junk", "All pornography is junk", "All of gothic romances are junk". It is impossible to make this kind of distinction.

And it is impossible certainly to make a neat distinction between any kind of book which moves a large number of people despite the fact that critics despise that sort of book.

Towards the end of the Victorian period there appeared two magnificent books which to this very day are not included in any book of history of Victorian Literature in England. One of them is Dracula and the other one is She. No critic has ever said a good word for Dracula or for She. But neither one of those books has ever been out of print for one single day in more than one hundred years. But the critic who breaks down the distinction between high and low literature breaks down the possibility of literary evaluation."If we go overboard the distinction does that mean to say that we can no longer distinguish between better books and worse books, or deeply moving books and apathic books, however,you are going to say it.

I don't know where the real answer is, but I know I'm an evaluator by nature and I know that I want to remain true to what I consider to be natural or essentially human response to literature. I know that if anybody in the world sees a movie that he has liked he wants to stop the first person he meets on the streets and say: "Go see it, it's great!" And when the person says to him: "Great, how? What's great about it?" , he then becomes a critic. Or when we see something we detest, we stop somebody and say "For God's sake, don't buy that!"

How can we evaluate, if we do not didtinguish between high and low letters, letters that appeal to the chosen few, and the letters that appeal to the broader masses. We can do what Tolstoi suggested we do,in a work which has much influenced me: What is Art. Tolstoi wanted to turn the whole thing upside down. He said: Let's call only those books good which move everybody old and young, men and women, black and white, educated and not educated, sophisticated and naive: and let's throw out all books which separate people, which divide the divided society even more." If you do what Tolstoi wanted to do, throw out Shakespeare, throw out Michael Angelo, throw out his own Anna Karenina. I'm not willing to do that,I don't want to say either what pleases the

majority audience is necessarily good and, therefore, anything that appeals only to the minority audience is bad, nor do I want to say that what appeals to the minority audiences is good and what appeals to the majority audiences is bad. I would like it to be possible to make the distinction in all literature between good and bad, to be able to say that Tarzan of the Apes is a good pop book and Jonathan Livingstone Seagull is strictly a sentimental pop book. It is very hard to do, because pop books often move religious responses. A book like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull is read by some people not as literature in any sense. Even in the traditional sense of mind, it is read as scripture. The first time I said to a class: "For God's sake don't ask me to read Jonathan Livingstone Seagull. I looked at it once if I had to go through it again, I would get sick to my stomach." Someone said to me: "Don't put down that book. Man, it changed my life. Boy, it changed my head!"

I am still working to find standards for distinguishing between works of art of lesser merit and works of art of greater merit, which do not conceal a distinction between high and low literature. And I think, I suggested to you last time, that I make that distinction on the basis of What was Literature. Those works which move us move many and move long because you can't judge by just one person here and there. Move many people over many years into the state of exstasy, really take them out of their read, out of their body, out of their normal life. I think such books are books that get high marks and I think that in every page one does find that books which do this are books which are profoundly mythic. Not books that are merely elegant in structure and beautiful. . .not books which contain philosophical or political ideas which are sophisticated and mature, and which we judge to be valuable, but works which create forms, characters and situations which exist outside of the world we live in. The greatest works of literature create characters and situations that exist independently of hte words on a page. The moment Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were invented, they passed into the great world outside. The moment Pickwick was invented, he passed into

the public demain. The moment Fallstaff was invented, he passed into the public domain. And in the American Literature Rip Van Winkle, Natty Bumpo, Huckleberry Finn,Captain Ahab; they don't even have to be people: Moby Dick, the whale, you can only tell whether a work has great mythic power because it can be translated from one medium to the other without losing its power. The meaning of a Pickwick, Don Quixote, Natty Bumpo, Huckleberry Finn can be rendered in a movie, in musical comedy on the stage, a picture on the wall, a carving made out of soap, anything. They were independent of authorship. They can be stolen. That's what happened with Pickwick. Anybody that knows anything about Victorian literature knows that Pickwick was stolen by a more popular writer. Huckleberry Finn, in the same way, has been used by everybody. The reason they can pass into the public domain is because they were in the public domain before the author found them. They have come out of our communal dreams.

I often think that you can tell when you are dealing with a mythic character just by the name that you give it. You call a character Shylock, you call a character Pickwick, you call a character Natty Bumpo. Those characters become common nouns. There is nn way of describing what Don Quixote stands for, except that it stands for quixotism. There is no way to describe what Huck Finn stands for except that it stands for Huckleberry Finn. I was almost a Hucklberry Finn professor of American Literature. A great regret in my life is that I did not make it. I was given a chair in the University, which had no name and I was asked to give it a name. So I said: "Let's give it a mythological name. Let's call it 'the Huck Finn chair of American Literature'." Everybody said: "No,no! You can't do that!" So I said: "How about 'The Mark Twain chair'?" But even that would not work. So I had to become a Samuel L. Clemens professor of pop literature.