

## REFLECTIONS OF AN ERA

Margaret Meagher, University of Southwestern Louisiana

Visualize, if you will, a scene that takes place five centuries from now in the library of a 25th century historian. There's great excitement today in this generally somber sanctuary for our scholar of the future has begun to analyze a discovery of the utmost significance. It seems that a group of his colleagues over in archeology have unearthed a perfectly preserved 20th century newstand. One that you and I might find on any street corner in America. At last our learned man of the future has been given the opportunity to do research on our complex civilization. For what better representation of contemporary life can be found than in a society's literature? As you can well imagine, our poor historian was quickly disillusioned after only a few moments of examination of what passes for literature in our age of paperback mediocrity and sensationalism.

If this failing were merely a disappointment to some future historian, perhaps it wouldn't be important. But historians and sociologists both have a disturbing tendency of picking out the valuable criteria of a society's development. Literature has always been important, for through the writings of a civilization, the people, the way of life, the culture are understood. Thus our great steps in science fail to hide the fact that the great mass of our literature is not written because of the artist's necessity of expressing himself, nor to persuade the citizenry. It is written simply for money. Now, I have nothing against money, but it is a strange fact, to me, that we do not financially reward the highest, but rather the lowest quality writing. By this strange set of values Grace Metalious is far more widely read and rewarded than Hemingway and Faulkner. After three centuries of supposed development, has progress been made from Macbeth to the level of Peyton Place? Another interesting point about this is that today in the United States, subscriptions to Mad Magazine far outnumber those to National Geographic or any scientific or technical magazine. It seems then that America fails by this criterion.

No higher standard of creativity can be found than art -- the visual representation of the world as shaped by the artist's mind. In a world that produced Michelangelo, Raphael, Renoir, and Leonard Di Vinci, the twentieth century world has given us what is referred to as "pop" or "modern art". Take an example of a picture in New York recently that sold for over \$200,000 at one of the top rate art shows. This sounds reasonable until you learn that it was painted by a three-year old monkey, throwing rotten eggs and oatmeal at a canvas. But I'm not taking just an isolated example, The New York Cultural Society reports that art such as this is being turned out all over the world on an assembly line type production. So the twentieth century has after all made advancements. Paul Harvey recently asked in an



editorial, "What is wrong with America? Why is it that we can't find the leaders that we so desperately need? Why is it that in a nation that bases its heritage on spirited individualism, why is it that in an era that needs them, they're not available?" He pointed to one of the major political parties in the United States that today is having trouble finding the leadership it needs for organization. The common mediocre man epitomizes the ideal American. The man who rises above the masses and expresses a contradictory opinion is an isolated example.

There are great men in America today, but it seems that they're not willing to assume positions of leadership. Look to recent examples in Alabama and Mississippi for men persecuted for their individualism and you see why it's not easy to express an opinion. It's not easy and that's the answer to the question, "What's wrong with America?"

Another comparison that could be made is in the field of crime, but even here a parallel can be drawn. Remember the days when it was a thrill to open your newspaper and read about the exploits of your favorite desperadoes? Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, Madhine Gun Kelley, Baby Face Nelson, and Scarface Al Capone. These men were giants in their field. You had to respect them because they fought for what they wanted. It was a business with them. In the Kansas City Massacre, five policemen fought it out with five gunmen for two days until finally the police cornered them with a struggle in a railroad station. Even then, the bandits were brave enough to fight to the end. Look at the ancient criminals of yesteryear. Robin Hood, the most daring criminal of his time who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. He courageously, with his band of men, fought the sheriff of Nottingham a whole lifetime. The style, the unique methods, the bravery are all qualities you don't find in the modern criminal. This is the age of the skinny neurotic playing tough guy with a comic book in his back pocket. Take for example Charles Starkweather who to be with his fourteen-year old girl friend, embarked on a murderous trail that left eleven bodies strewn along the wayside. When they shot someone, they'd turn around so they wouldn't have to look them in the eye. When the police closed in on them, instead of finding a cocky, arrogant, brave murderer, they found Starkweather huddled in the corner crying... Even our criminals have lost something. No longer are they brave, spirited individuals, they're nothing but spineless characters, frustrated by society. Now the point here is not to glorify criminals of the past but to show you that even here, something has been lost. Individualism no longer exists.

Why is it that in an age of technological miracles that man and his creative endeavors fall far behind? Why is it that when an artist turns to the world to capture the beauty he sees there on canvas, why is it that he comes up with a scrawling mass of color? Why is it that we allow society to pay homage to second and third rate writers? Why is it that individualism and leadership are sacrificed for lesser achievements? Why is it that we allow these indiscretions and more?

I'm afraid that all of these things are going to cause our age to be mis-judged by future generations. I'm afraid that we're going to be remembered as the aesthetically corrupt machine-man age. That age that produced scientific miracles and men who have degenerated into unimaginative masses. I'm afraid the future historian is going to have the same message for us that the prophet Daniel had for King Belshazzar in the Biblical story of the handwriting on the wall. The message read, "The days of your kingdom have been numbered ... You have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting ...".