

Mrs. Metzger's 'filthy' poem

'Now the entire State will be involved with my English lesson'

PAUL EBERLE

When Deena Metzger, an English instructor from L.A. Valley College was fired recently, it triggered a torrent of protests from teachers and students and other concerned people all over the country. Citizens for Academic Freedom had been formed by a group of L.A. teachers to organize action projects to fight Mrs. Metzger's ouster. Their main objectives at this time are to raise money for a defense fund, to stage a huge teach-in and rally at Valley College during the second week of the fall semester, and to inform the public of the real facts of the case by seeking as many speaking engagements as possible.

In one of the most important academic freedom cases in many years the L.A. Junior College Board of Trustees voted to fire Mrs. Metzger last Tuesday by a vote of 5 to 1, for using her poem, "Jehovah's Child," as instruction material in her freshman English composition class.

"I used the poem as an example of material which might, on the surface, appear to be offensive but was, in fact, highly moral," Mrs. Metzger told me. "And it was an opportunity for the students to employ the criterion established by the courts, in cases of pornography, to a poem which I understood perfectly—I knew its intent, I knew why those words were there. This was a freshman composition course, and in every course of this type, there is a unit on censorship and pornography and obscenity. And I also used it to talk about language with my students and to show them that words have to be understood with context and that sometimes you have to use strong words... and that in fact the language pushed forward the morality instead of interfering with it. If I'd used other words, politer words, softer, nicer words, I would have created a nicer, kinder, softer woman. I would have destroyed the poem. I wanted as ugly and hard a vision as I could get.

"I wrote the poem last November. I used it because Leslie Hoag had used it in her class, and the lesson had worked magnificently. And then when I started teaching my lesson I suddenly realized that the poem was perfect for the purpose, particularly because of the Ginsberg decision, which includes intent, as a criterion of pornography.

"I asked my students to apply these criteria to the poem. Now the entire state will in a sense be involved in my English lesson, when we get to court. That's what they'll have to do, I assume, since they're calling me a pornographer, that eventually what's going to have to be discussed is

whether or not this is pornography. In my opinion it is clearly not.

"And the other English lesson is what I've been telling my students all along—that people can't read. They read THEMSELVES into literature. They don't read what the author writes! And that is clearly being proven all over the state. It's the most successful English lesson I have ever taught. I'm teaching it to 8,000, 000 people. That's kind of nice!"

However, once Deena began using the poem in her classroom, the repercussions came very fast. Two of her students complained of being offended by the poem to their Mormon bishop,

bring this matter to my pulpit, making it a public issue. The only reason I don't do this is because of my profound respect for you and my confidence in your leadership... I know you will do all in your power..." etc., etc. Another parson called the poem the "product of a sick, sick, sick mind."

Typical of the letters from businessmen is the following: "To help you remember me, I was a member of the Wilshire Rotary Club at the same time that you were a member... this letter concerns a matter that has come to my attention, namely a poem (so called) Jehovah's Child about which you have received copies

The language pushed the morality instead of interfering with it'



DEENA METZGER

photo by Paul Eberle

JEHOVAH'S CHILD

In Christ's Name, kindness is sucking the cock of a turned cheek--Jesus style --Jehovah would have bitten it off.

Straw legged Cindy  
Now over the wall  
dilates prismatic eyes  
grinds unhabited wooden hips  
mouse trap cunt  
with vise and swivel just in case  
leers and extends her pay-first  
scanty chocolate and strawberry nipples  
to be licked from crumbling sugar cones  
A Thrifty treat—5¢ Sunday special.  
The extracts from a bloody napkin dispenser  
a Volkswagon, folded mechanic and clubfooted daughter,  
for entr'acts in her own private guerilla charity show,  
and a ball point German shepherd with retractable pecker.  
Then she mounts her own golden daughters on a  
pay-as-you-go Zircon  
and is off  
through the American meatgrinder  
seeking enlightenment by guru in gas stations across the country  
teaching reading by billboard  
and arithmetic by credit card.  
\$15,000 later she races, pussy first,  
through Denver, Chicago, Florida  
arrows through Seminole reservations  
in a nylon cartwheel to the primitive soul,  
then alligator lined, inside and out her quicksand womb  
she rolls the hospital bed out from under daddy  
and wraps his heart in tin foil  
for possible transplant  
when her own nickel and 17 jewel virgin is unsprung.  
Then it's New York  
and tea in the tenement  
Blue point oysters in a three fantasy walkup climbed  
on reefers filched in a \$2.00 trick.  
In October when burning roaches provide little heat  
she chirps a Robin's going S. for winter—"Love—You"—  
for dough to roll into a moist and spicy  
gingerbread, minklined, Moroccan cruise.  
—No takers! Pre syphilitic, she  
disconnects the 9 month telephone silence  
with husband, father, god, country and all creditors at sea  
drops the mechanical spouse in the East River  
with concrete daughter tied about his neck,  
clamps the dog's jaw on the postman's leg  
and hailing Marys on gold teeth  
extracted in Catholic Subway muggings,  
she retreats to Convent Dolores, Dolores, Dolores.  
Repentant she reconciles testaments:  
fucks only Jehovah; sucks only Christ.

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These students and two members of the faculty printed copies of the poem and distributed them to certain church groups and right-wing businessmen in the community. Then the letters began to come to Dr. Robert E. Horton, president of the college.

Someone from Gov. Ronald Reagan's office called and said: "You have twenty-four hours to straighten this out, Or else!" The entire San Fernando Valley delegation of the State Legislature, quick to declare their vigilant purity, screamed for Mrs. Metzger's head and then went after Horton for not summarily firing her. There were letters from local Protestant clergymen calling the poem "filth," and demanding that Deena be dismissed.

A Baptist minister wrote: "... as the pastor of a church of 8000 members, I would not hesitate to

(sic)... it is so filthy it is disgusting to talk about it... let me assure you that I will give you all the support I can to assist you to eliminate such individuals from your teaching staff... we will be behind you..." etc., etc.

Most of the letters from the businessmen and pastors were surprisingly illiterate in construction and usage of the English language, and it would be safe to say that most of the authors of these letters could not pass Deena Metzger's freshman English Composition course. Yet, they indicated not the slightest hesitancy in judging the intent and literary value of her poem.

The Valley Times, a moribund daily newspaper, noted mostly for its race track tips and fanatical right-wing editorials, published the poem without permission of the author, asking for readers'

comments, in an obvious effort to stir up even more redneck rage against Deena.

The San Fernando Valley "Green Sheet," printed a highly slanted account of the incident, quoting the statements of the six Valley Assemblymen who screamed for Mrs. Metzger's dismissal. And Ex-Police Chief Tom Reddin, that intellectual giant and literary authority denounced the poem in his nightly newscast on Channel Five:

"We consider it bad poetry... and if its author and its defenders get away with it, we suggest a new style for all campus buildings... in the shape of outhouses..."

Even a cursory reading of the poem will tell any intelligent person that it is a statement of moral indignation against the hollowness and hypocrisy of a certain type that is highly prevalent in contemporary society. Harrison West, Chairman of the English Department at Valley, in a letter to president Horton, characterized Mrs. Metzger as "an outstanding teacher... vital... effective, professional instructor." He said of her, "I feel sure, from what I know of her teaching that she would not introduce any curricular material into her class without careful evaluation of its educational outcome. I believe she is guided in her teaching by the highest moral... principles." He described the poem as "an apocalyptic and visionary poem," with "a Blakean sense of outrage at vulgarity and immorality. The author used explicit examples of vulgarity to describe a tawdriness which she rejects."

Other members of the Valley College faculty at a Citizens for Academic Freedom press conference last week, described Mrs. Metzger as "a magnificent teacher," and "a vital, creative teacher." A Catholic Professor from USC, wrote a lengthy paper praising "Jehovah's Child" and stating why he felt it was a good poem and a moral one. One of the many letters of sympathy and support Deena received came from a Trapist monastery.

Charles Ansell, Chairman of Citizens for Academic Freedom, described the poem as "a religious poem." He said, "I am a religious man, I attend services every week. And I consider it a highly religious, highly moral piece of work. I am appalled at the stupidity of the Board of Trustees in their precipitous ill-considered action."

West, her department chairman, pleaded with President Horton to try to educate the community to a more enlightened attitude, stating that "... the fear of offending someone should not paralyze a professor of English as she searches for truth with her students."

However, the flurry of angry complaints from the bible-bangers and money-changers of the community continued to grow. A stronger man might have stood up to them and said, "I will not allow a dedicated, creative teacher to be made the victim of a redneck lynch mob. If you fire her, it'll be over my dead body!"

But Robert E. Horton is not a strong man. And he certainly did not want to risk his soft, high-salaried job as President of Valley Junior College. So, instead, he moved against Deena Metzger.

"I was told that the President wanted to see me," Deena said, "and he wanted me to explain the lesson. I said I'd be delighted to do so, and he told me that the poem was offensive! I had done nothing illegal, the poem did not advocate an illegal act, it was not pornographic—which he agreed! And it wasn't libellous. Consequently, there was no reason for me not to use it in the classroom. He agreed that it wasn't any of these three. Nevertheless, it offended people, and he wanted me to take that poem and all similar material out of the classroom. All similar material."

When she asked Horton how she was to know what was "similar" and what was not, he came up with the classic bureaucrat's solution: "It's very simple. Simply submit all your material to your department head for prior approval."

"Okay," Deena went on. "First of all, I lecture off the top of my head a lot, which means I have to take my head to the department head. Because I don't know what examples or illustrations I'm going to pull out. Secondly, it's clearly prior censorship. And if that could happen to me, then it could happen to everyone else, and I, Deena Metzger would be responsible for establishing a precedent abridging academic freedom. Untenable!"

"So I went to my colleagues and explained this. At the same time, Leslie Hoag, who is my colleague, is involved. And she also was using the poem—in a lesson in which she was discussing not the same thing I was discussing but, I believe, the artist in society. And she invited me into the class and she thought this was a wonderful opportunity to present the students not only with the poem but also the artist at the same time. We could talk about motivation."

"So Leslie was told the same thing. In addition, we were told that Leslie couldn't use "The Student as Nigger," by Jerry Farber. And the irony of that is that I have just had an article accepted by THE major journal of the teaching of English composition in the country, in which I talk about how I teach English Composition and I explained why and how I used "The Student As Nigger." So Leslie was told not to use it. I had been using it for three years, without any complaint. And I was told I couldn't use a particular advertising brochure which I used in another class, a brochure titled, "How to Be A Sexual Superman in Seven Days," which I had received in the mail, which I thought was particularly scurrilous, because in order to fit in with this brochure and be susceptible to it, you had to believe that you are inadequate. You know? You had to be a Clark Kent. It's psychologically destructive.

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Metzger: 'I have been telling my students that people can't read.'