

# Schools' English Electives:

## From Sublime to Ridiculous

By MARY BREASTEL Mrs. Kelvin's "Psychology of Literature" class had started Dr. Theodore Rubin's short novel "Jo the story of a schizophrenic little boy. Her class went to describe Jordi's symptoms of measles?"

Hands shot up everywhere with a thoroughness that showed they had clearly read their homework—and said something more — they clearly loved the class.

Mrs. Kelvin accepted Mrs. Kelvin was attempting to teach her students how to analyze the book for its psychological lessons and for literary form. Under brisk, cheerful direction, students soon became engaged in arguments over author's intentions in a page that was half dream and half reality.

"All right," Mrs. Kelvin asked, "What is a symptom?"

**Psychological and Literary**

A chorus of voices, eager, told her a symptom was a sign. She wrote on board: "Symptoms — symptoms (visible, can be detected)

"Now," she said, "I want to know some of the symptoms."

peared to the "Literature of Chess." Their experience is being repeated by thousands of students all over the city. According to the Board of Education's Bureau of English, there is hardly a high school in the city that does not now offer its students a variety of English courses. A recent bureau survey indicated that 62 of the city's 71 academic and comprehensive high schools and 14 of its 25 vocational high schools now are offering at least 780 different English electives.

### Student Needs Cited

The courses range from the sublime (Shakespeare, Joyce) to what some English scholars might call the ridiculous (best-sellers, mystery and detective novels and rock poetry). What they all are designed to do is to impart English skills to high-school students through the use of

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# English Electives A Handstand

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materials and methods that really interest them.

"It's part of the philosophy of the day," said Anita Hill, head of the Bureau of English. "There is a greatest interest in student needs. We do not believe that one can become an educated person without having read books and having developed certain skills. Content and ideas are more important now."

Mrs. Dore explained that the Bureau of English is encouraging city high schools to offer English electives geared to student interests in the spring of 1970 and that the program had grown.

"When Julia Richmond High School offered the course the first time, the administration thought they could scrape together enough students for one section," she recalled. "The next year, seven sections?"

There are now 22 schools in the city offering English courses focusing on the Bible.

Other popular electives include creative writing, drama, study, journalism, playwriting, public speaking and science fiction.

The course selection does not always exclude the standard English courses often merely supplementing required courses in reading and writing skills. At its best, Mrs. Dore said, it combines student interests and their own strengths.

Mrs. Dore said that the statewide Regents examination in English still determines course content to a large extent. Four years of English, whether in electives

or required courses, are necessary for graduation from high school. And as John Dewey and Hillcrest High Schools, where more than 50 English electives are offered, students with problems are encouraged, sometimes required to take courses emphasizing reading and writing skills.

According to Mrs. Dore, Dewey and Hillcrest offer only two high school English electives for their entire years of study. At the High School of Science, for example, only about one-sixth of the students take elective English, while the majority still take the comprehensive, traditionally required courses.

At many schools that offer English electives appear to frustrate the teachers as they stimulated their students, producing a variety of teaching techniques.

Students in a combined English-Social studies course at Hillcrest in Queens, for example, are enrolled in a year program that is designed as a simulated world. They recently conducted a mock Inquisition, putting their teachers on the part of their "visit" to a country—a visit in which they read the poetry of Federico Lorca and portions of Cervantes's "Don Quixote" translation.

When they "entered" ancient Greece, a number of students were taken into custody because they failed to show proper identification. They were then assigned to read the Sophocles "Oedipus Rex," Euripides's "Philoctetes," Aristotle's "Poetics" and translations of Greek mythology. Now they are "visiting" Russia, discussing Dostoevski, Tolstoy and Katherine the Great.

## Grammar Is Offered

But Hillcrest students feel they have not mastered the simpler writing skills to elect to take courses in English grammar. And students who are far below that age in performance, however, are required to take "the Annex," a small-rate school where reading skills are taught.

At John Dewey School in Brooklyn, students can study individual periods of English literature entirely on their own or an independent student

program supervised by the English department. Or they may choose to take a course on the "Mystery and Detective Novel" or one on Shakespeare or both.

John Dewey which opened five years ago as the prototype of the elective system, requires each student to take a certain number of introductory writing and literature courses and requires each to take a total of 20 English courses to graduate. But a "course" at John Dewey may last only seven weeks. The schedule is changed at the school five times a year.

The Bureau of English lists 56 categories of courses being offered by the high schools and 28 additional courses in the category of "miscellaneous," which includes such offerings as "Body Language" (James Monroe High School), "Chaucer" (Hillcrest), "The Literature of Madness" (John Bowne) and "Edgar Allan Poe" (Alexander Hamilton High School).

But the as yet unanswered question in this new movement toward electives is: Will the new course succeed where educators believe the old ones failed?

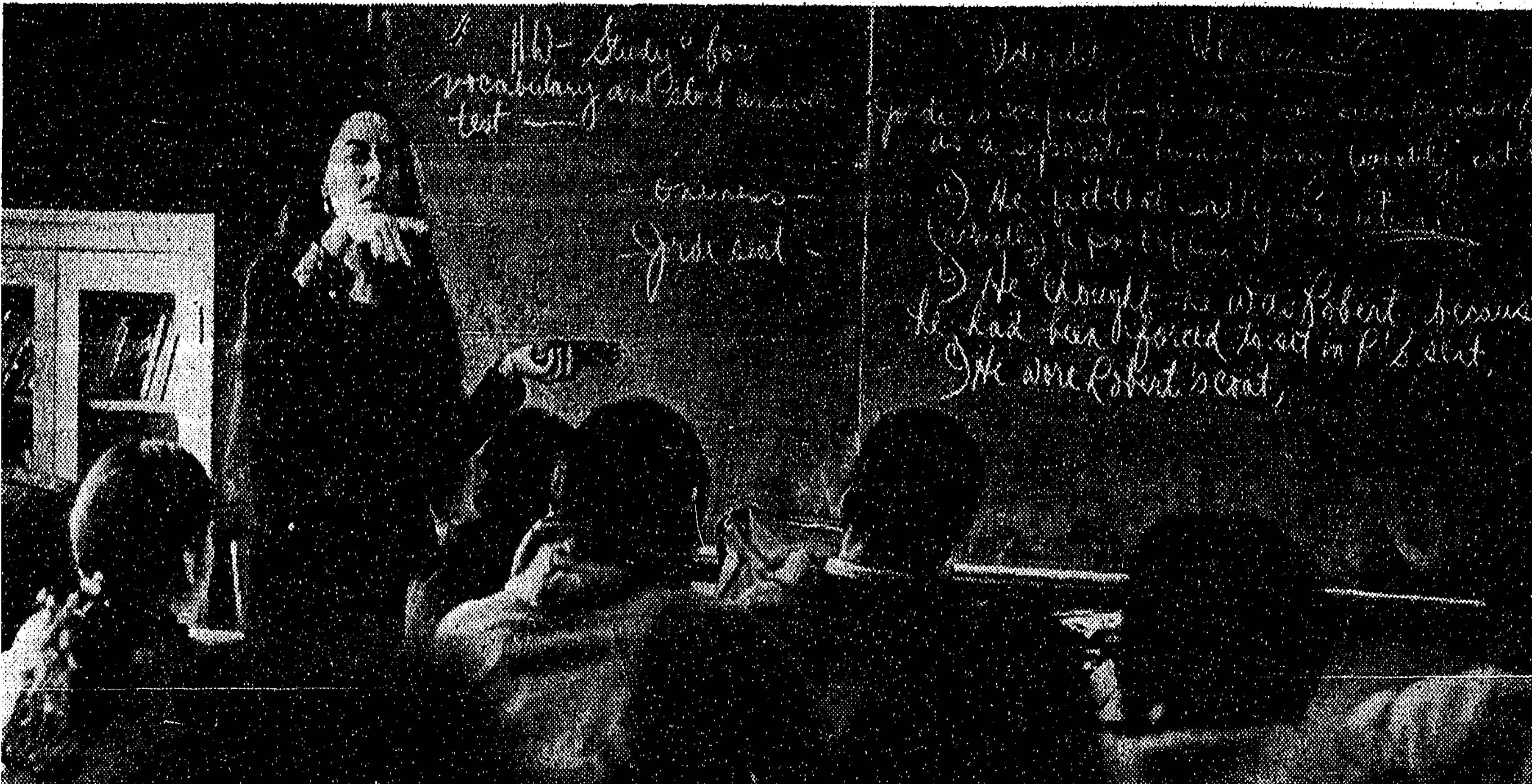
According to Mrs. Dore, no one really knows the answer to that. She said that the state will be evaluating the city's English electives in 1976, trying to discover whether the standard reading and writing skills are being developed in the new courses.

## 'Drawbacks' Are Noted

"We've had as yet no report to say whether students are doing better or worse," Mrs. Dore said.

Joseph Zogby, the chairman of John Dewey's English department, said he felt "there are certain penalties" in the elective system, however. He said he thought the formal skills had been somewhat neglected under the elective system and that this showed itself in the students' poor spelling and by sloppy organization of essays.

If this sort of weakness is confirmed in the state's evaluation, what happens at John Dewey, where the elective system was first established on a wide scale, may eventually happen in the other city high schools—a reversion to an old-fashioned grilling in skills.



Mrs. Renee Kelvin teaching "Psychology of Literature," an elective for juniors and seniors at Eastern District High School in Brooklyn

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