

THE PLAIN DEALER

OHIO'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

CLEVELAND, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1998

Writer urges students to find new heroes

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GATES MILLS — Hannibal "the cannibal" Lecter is no hero, says writer Peter H. Gibbon.

Yet Lecter became one after being portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the 1991 movie, "Silence of the Lambs," which won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Moviegoers and critics overlooked that Lecter was a notorious serial killer, Gibbon said. They focused on the movie's artistry and not its lack of a moral message.



Gibbon

For the last three years, Gibbon, a research associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has been researching the

"He became a cult figure, and that's fine," said Gibbon, 57. "But to give the movie the blessing of the Academy, and to say this is the best movie in America, represents a real change in society."

disappearance of heroes from American society.

He's found that movies are both causes and barometers of anti-heroic times. Other causes he cited are the information and sexual revolutions, judgmental journalists, celebrity worship and misbehavior by athletes and politicians in public.

"You can add endless causes, such as the collapse of authority, but those are the immediate ones," said the 1960 Shaker Heights High School graduate, who now lives in Cambridge, Mass.

Gibbon spoke yesterday to classes at Gilmour Academy, a private East Side prep school.

Hero is a code word, Gibbon told a group of juniors and seniors, for idealism, affirmation and belief.

"I feel those qualities are absent from America and many American schools," he said.

Gibbon started his research after he wrote a column in Newsweek in 1993 about disappearing heroes and the increasing irreverence.

He said he was astounded by the response, and he decided to explore the subject further. He now is writing a book about it.

Heroes blend bravery, courage, extraordinary achievement and high character. We need heroes because they are our better and braver selves, he said.

"Heroes lift us up, give us aspirations," he said. "Heroes force us to reach. They show us how much more we can do and how much better we can be."

Teachers should pick novels with a positive message that teaches a lesson, such as "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "The Good Earth," Gibbon said, not novels

that mirror a grim reality, such as "The Outsiders."

"I think they'd internalize the message and be like those people, and be more optimistic and hopeful," he said.

It's a more sober, realistic time today, he said. And it's one that is occupied with looking at the bad, imperfect side of athletes, politicians, celebrities and others who become notable.

Heroes are not perfect, and there is greed and exploitation in American history. But "that should not mean that America is the great exploiter and John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie are evil."

He urged schools and students to fight popular culture, which he sees as much too powerful. Celebrities can be heroes, Gibbon said, citing Paul Newman, Rob Reiner and James Stewart, a few of his favorites.

But frequently, celebrities are famous for a brief period, and after they get too rich, too beautiful, Americans tear them down.

"Celebrities are transient," Gibbon said. "Heroes are lasting."

Other heroes Gibbon cited:

Winston Churchill, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Babe Didrikson Zahariás, Jackie Robinson and Harry Truman.

And John Glenn.

"I've never heard the word hero used so much than in the past month," he said. "I think it shows we are hungry for heroes."