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**Title:** "Secret Societies in American Colleges," by Thomas L. Jones

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Oration

Secret Societies in American Colleges.

Thomas L. Jones '01

The position of Secret Societies in American colleges is peculiar. Ignored, discouraged, and prohibited; they live, flourish, and increase. Every college has them, and they are growing in strength and numbers. To fully ascertain their character and influence involves considerable labor, but results richly repay us for our effort. Of one thing we may be certain, and that is, that common opinion of them is erroneous; as is that of everything connected with colleges. Little or no attention is given to such subjects; and yet the fact that thousands of young men are in attendance at

the higher institutions of learning in this country, who, by their training, will be the natural guides of State, and leaders in the professions, is surely momentous enough to justify some slight consideration.

With this in view, the importance of all student associations becomes evident; and that few know and less care anything of the gauntlet of danger every boy must run before he reaches "Commencement Day" becomes unaccountable. A mild suspicion dwells in the minds of many that a great deal of dissipation goes on; and that it is rather dangerous to trust a boy

at college. And it is, perhaps, generally  
believed that, of all perils besetting the  
paths of students, none are so dangerous  
as fraternities; in consequence of which  
they have been forbidden by parents; frowned  
on by faculties, and most bitterly antagonized  
by so-called Non-Fraternity  
students.

Let us see if such be the case. If  
fraternities are banded together to  
ruin verdant freshmen; if they  
veritably play the parts of Scylla  
and Charybdis, both at once, shipwrecking  
and swallowing up the innocent, the  
sooner such a monster be hanged,  
drawn, and quartered, the better.

But let us remark at the outset, that it is an obvious mistake to hold the system responsible for the misdeeds of its members, for like reasoning would condemn the college itself. Only when it can be shown that without such associations young men would be saints, may it be inferred that the system is wrong. The standard of morality at every college is fearfully low. Yet, in the schools of England, where the ages of the "boys" are about the same as those of our college students, and where there are no fraternities, the want of virtue is quite as glaring as in our new colleges.

There are vices prevalent at every college which may well raise the parent shudder.

Not the roguish frocks, nor occasional  
wine suppers, need cause alarm, for the  
former annoy only the victim, and the latter  
are well hit off by Thackeray as "stuffy lads  
around a table, covered with bad sweetmeats,  
drinking bad wines, telling bad stories, and  
singing bad songs over and over again," and  
such practices are discarded as soon as  
the hilarity and ostentatious life of youth  
depart.

If the character of fraternities is to be  
improved, the habits of college men must  
be changed. And in judging them we  
should note the distinction between youthful  
francies, and those that are vulgar, low,  
and mean. The worst vices of young men

come from a too rigorous censorship over  
their actions, and a denial of suitable  
recreations. A love of fun and frolic, and  
a natural desire to "see the world," prompt  
youth to wild and wayward actions, but  
hardly to serious crime. When fuddled  
with animal spirits, and giddy with con-  
stitutional joy, they are to be forgiven for  
frisking and capering in their paroxysms  
of merriment. To condemn this ebullition  
of youthful gaiety with sweeping  
denunciation and unqualified abuse, indicates  
a Pentateuchal "Pharaoism", fanatical  
and unwise. As well try to put out fire  
with a bellows.

And, after all, the experience, gained



in the follies of youth, is a teacher  
worth, far more, to many, than Tutor or  
Professor." It is only by looking back over  
the tombs of our departed errors, that we  
can see, by the side of each, the face of  
a warning angel.

If there be real good in man, he will grow  
wiser and better as he grows older; and when  
we know that youthful thoughtlessness  
is responsible for much of our early  
vice, may we not hope much from the  
more mature years: that they will  
bring with them virtue <sup>and</sup> wisdom? Since  
fact bars out this expectation, let the  
"austere moralist" remember that —  
"In the increasing progress of the world,

A wise spirit is at work for us.

A better eye than theirs, most prodigal  
of Hessian, and most stubborn of our good,  
Even in what seems our most unfruitful hours.

With this thought in mind, and in this  
spirit, we should endeavor to save  
our fellows from the consequences of  
their ignorance and folly. This, I claim,  
Secret Societies have always done. They  
are not "Mission Bands," but they  
can and do, elevate and benefit members.  
To the young student, immersed from  
home influences, and debarr'd from  
home society, the Fraternity is a god sent.  
Here he finds the fellowship, the variety,  
the spice, and, best of all, the brotherhood,

for which he longs. General, intimate,  
and hearty, good fellowship, coupled with  
the spirit of brotherhood, makes up the  
capstone of the Fraternity system.

Fraternities have planned no rebellions,  
but have furnished enjoyment and content.  
The system reveals the college itself in  
stability and endurance. They fill a  
gap in college life, inspiring all with  
nurture and regard. They bring true  
friends, and these are Heaven's choicest  
blessings. Here true enduring intimacies  
are cemented. The uniting ties are  
not weak and evanescent, but of the  
tough fibre of human hearts, doubling  
our joys and dividing our sorrows.

With the present generation it remains, whether this system with its tremendous influence shall be a power for good or for evil. Its past is glorious; its present is wakening. What of the future? If each member shall do his best to build it up, it may save many a man, be a blessing to many a parent; and will do much for the spirit of art and education. Shaped with a hatred of hypocrisy, shame, and vice; and with a love for purity, courage, and truth, the Fraternity system will have found the hero's grapple, with which to grapple man fast to man, so that neither time nor change

may part them; and, animated by  
this spirit, will take a rank  
higher than fondest fancy ever dreamed  
of, and will forever retain the love  
of good and honest men, - because it  
will be worthy of them.

Finis.

Commencement Oration of Thomas L. Jones of 1901  
Transcribed by Timothy Flaherty, February 2015  
Edited by Daniel Duchaine, October 2017

Oration  
Secret Societies in American Colleges  
Thomas L. Jones '01

The position of secret societies in American colleges is peculiar. Ignored, discouraged, and prohibited, they live, flourish, and increase. Every college has them, and they are growing in strength and numbers. To fully ascertain their character and influence involves considerable labor, but results richly repays us for our effort. Of one thing we may be certain, and that is, that common opinion of them is erroneous; as is that of everything connected with colleges. Little or no attention is given to such subjects; and yet the fact that standards of young men are in attendance at

the higher institutions of learning in this country, who, by their training will be the natural guides of state, and leaders in the professions is surely momentous enough to justify some slight consideration.

With this in view, the importance of all student associations becomes evident, and that few know and less care anything of the gauntlet of danger every boy must [run?] before he reaches "Commencement Day" becomes unaccountable. A wild suspicion dwells in the minds of many that, a great deal of dissipation goes on; and that it is rather dangerous to trust a boy

at college. And it is, perhaps, generally believed that, of all perils besetting the paths of students, more are so dangerous as fraternities in consequence of which they have been forbidden by parents; frowned on by faculties, and most bitterly [ostracized?] by so called now fraternity students

Let us see is such be the case. If fraternities are banded together to ruin verdant freshman, if they veritably play the parts of Scylla and Charybdis, both at once, shipwrecking and swallowing up the innocent, the sooner such a monster be hanged, drawn, and quartered, the better.

But let us remain at the outset, that it is an obvious mistake to hold the system responsible for the misdeeds of its members, for like reasoning would condemn the college itself. Only when it can be shown that without such associations young men would be saints, may it be inferred that the system is wrong. The standard of morality at every college is fearfully low. Yet, in the schools of England, where the ages of the "boys" are about the same as those of our college students, and where there are no fraternities, the want of virtue is quite as glaring as in our own colleges. There are vices prevalent at every college which may well make the parent shudder

not the roguishe tricks nor occasional [wine?] supper, need cause alarm, for the former annoy only the victim, and the latter are well but off by Thackeray as "thirty lads around a table, covered [well?] bad sweet meats, drinking bad wines, telling bad stories, and singing bad songs over and over again," and such practices are discarded as soon as the hilarity and ostrich like digestion of youth depart.

If the character of fraternities is to be improved, the habits of college men must be changed. And in judging them we should note the destruction [htierem?] youthful [Franko?], and those that are vulgar, low, and mean. The worst vices of young men

come from, a too rigorous censorship over their actions, and a denial of suitable recreations. A love of fun and frolic, and a natural desire to “see the world,” prompt youth to wild and wayward actions, but hardly to serious crime. When fuddled with animal spirits, and giddy with constitutional joy, they are to be forgiven for breaking and [capening?] in their [paroxysms?] of merriment. To condemn this ebullition of youthful gaiety with sweeping denunciation and unqualified abuse, whether a Puritanical “Pharasaism”, fanatical and unwise. As well try to put out lives with a bellows.

And after all the experience gained

in the follies of youth is a teacher worth far more, to many, than tutor or professor. “It is only by looking back over the truths of our departed errors that we can see, by the side of each, the face of a warring-angel.”

If there be real good in man, he will grow truer and better as he grows older; and when we know that youthful thoughtlessness is responsible for much of our early vice, may we not hope much from the more mature years: that they will bring forth their virtue and wisdom? Since fact leans out this expectation, let the “austere moralist” remember that – “In the unreasoning progress of the world,

a wiser spirit is at work for us. A better eye than theirs, most prodigal of blessing, and most studious of our good, ever in what seems and must untruthful lower.”

With this thought in mind, and in this spirit we should endeavor to save our fellows from the consequences of their ignorance and folly. This, I claim, Secret Societies have always done. They are not “Mission Bands” but they can and do, elevate and benefit members. To the young student, [unencumbered?] from home influences, and debarred from home society, the Fraternity is a god send. Here he finds the fellowship, the variety, the spice, and best of all, the brotherhood,

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Fraternities have planned no rebellions, but have furnished enjoyment and content. The system [rivals?] the college itself in stability and endurance. They fill a gap in college life, inspiring all with reverence and regard. They bring true friends, and these are Heaven’s choicest blessings. Here true enduring intricacies are cemented. The [wirting?] lies are not weak and evanescent, but of the [Wigle fibre?] of human hearts, doubling our joys and dividing our sorrows.

With the present generation it remains whether this system with its tremendous influence shall be a power for good or for evil. Its past is glorious; its present whispering. What of the future? If each member shall do its best to build it up, it may save many a man, be a blessing to many a parent; and will do much for the spirit of art and education. Shaped with a hatred of hypocrisy, shown, and vice; and with a love for purity, courage, and truth, the “fraternity system will have of steel, with which to grapple man fast to man, so that neither tune nor change

may part them; and, animated by this spirit, will take a rank higher than fondest fancy ever dreamed of, and will forever retain the love of good and honest men, -because it will be worthy of them.

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