

Classic Words

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

introduction

What are the best words in the English language? Several years ago I sorted dubiously through recommended word lists and began wondering whether direct study of such vocabulary lists is really worthwhile. Does long-term mastery of vocabulary result from such activities as briefly looking up a word, writing down the definition, and using the word in a sentence, especially if there is no deep exposure to the word as it has been used in literature? How do we learn the nuances of meaning and the subtle possibilities of phrasing that are involved in mastering new words? How many times must we be exposed to a word before it loses its strange otherness and seems familiar? How can we identify the advanced language that is replete in the world of books, in the world of scholarly and professional ideas? How can we find the vocabulary that we really must know if we are to feel comfortable in a world of words? What words are most important to know?

To answer these questions, I began marking the advanced vocabulary in every English language classic I read, and I developed a computer database in which I collected the thousands of vocabulary examples I found. In my computer, I entered the word, the sentence the word was in, the chapter, author, and title. *King Lear* took me 251 entries. Orwell's *1984* took 315 entries. *The Great Gatsby* took 232 entries. Some summers, I typed these words for hours every day. Ten years later, I had collected 21,000 examples of words from seventy-six classics, and at last I have a sample large enough to know, with certainty, that some words are found in most of the best books in English and American literature.

These classic words—words so venerable that they have become classics in themselves—are important to the profound understanding of most good novels, plays, poems, and essays and should be known to all of us as we embark on our journey through good literature.

What are the classic words? Some of the answers may surprise you. Among the most frequently found classic words are *serene*, *manifest*, *abate*, *austere*, *tangible*, *palpable*, *stolid*, *odious*, and *sagacity*. We also find *morose*, *inexorable*, *oblique*, *billow*, *ignominy*, and *sallow*. *Alacrity* is there, and *rebuke*, and *zenith*. Would you have expected *maxim* to be common? Or *vestige*? Would you have expected *lurid* to be a classic word?

In this book I discuss some of the most important classic words in the English language, showing how American and British authors have used them. My purpose is to provide a richer exposure to each word than has been otherwise available, and to do so in a way that reveals to readers that each of these words is not only in the classics but is itself a vocabulary classic—a word of such quality that it has been a ubiquitous presence in good English.

L countenance

Among the most classic of the classic words, the modern English noun *countenance* comes through Middle English and Old French from the Latin verb *continere*, to hold. The countenance is the face, and especially the human contents of the face. In a person's countenance we may see sadness, anger, love, or doubt. We see the person, not just the physiognomy or facial physiology.

The noun *countenance* has been used by Toni Morrison and Eudora Welty, by George Orwell and F. Scott Fitzgerald, by Joseph Heller and Harper Lee, and by toad-maker Kenneth Grahame. Robert Louis Stevenson used it. Harriet Beecher Stowe used it. Swift, Defoe, Milton, and Shakespeare used it. We find *countenance* in *Ethan Frome*, in *Peter Pan*, in *Lord Jim*, and in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. We find it in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. We find it in *Jane Eyre*. And in *Ivanhoe*. And in *Walden*. *Countenance* appears in seemingly every book of note in English and American literature for four hundred years.

Countenance is ubiquitous, and it is ubiquitous because it is our best word for the visible self, the individuality that shows in our faces. It is a word of high humanity, and upon reflection we realize that we would have expected human beings writing about human meanings to make use of such a human word.

How is *countenance* used in sentences? Well, in the classics we find a forbidding countenance, a storming countenance, a cheerful countenance, and an ailing countenance. We find a grave countenance and a fearful countenance, a smiling countenance and a martyr's countenance. There is a sad countenance, a sour countenance, a benevolent countenance, and a saturnine countenance. There is a good-natured countenance. Shakespeare described a king's countenance, a countenance surely like a father, and a ghostly countenance "more in sorrow than in anger." King Lear has "that in your countenance which I would fain call master." In *Paradise Lost*, Milton described a countenance filled with "studious thoughts abstruse," a countenance "too severe to be beheld," and a countenance filled with "doubtful hue."

In the eighteenth century, Swift, Defoe, and Mary Wollstonecraft relied on *countenance* for their descriptions. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe found that in Friday, "it was easy to see joy and courage in the fellow's countenance." Defoe described a countenance that "discovered a strange eagerness," a countenance "most inexpressibly dreadful, impossible for words to describe," and a "very good countenance, not a fierce and surly aspect." Robinson spoke to Friday "with a raised voice and cheerful countenance." Jonathan Swift, in the fiercely satirical *Gulliver's Travels*, noted "something in their countenances that made my flesh creep with a horror I cannot express." Gulliver found people "whose countenances and habit expressed so much misery and want," and he quailed when the "fierceness of this creature's countenance all together discomposed me." Mary Wollstonecraft, in her brilliant *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, objected that in "the countenance of girls we only look for vivacity and bashful modesty." She observed how "mental grace, not noticed by vulgar eyes, often flashes across a rough countenance."

In the nineteenth century, British and American authors used *countenance* in seemingly every description. Jane Austen, in *Pride and Prejudice*, described a pleasant countenance, a good-humoured countenance, a resolute composure of countenance, a steady countenance, an expression of goodness in the countenance, and a countenance of grave reflection. In Mary Shelley's 1816 *Frankenstein*, Shelley noted a wan countenance, frowning and angry countenances, angelic countenances, and a countenance that bespoke bitter anguish. "Oh," she noted, "no mortal could support the horror of that countenance." Washington Irving described a character with "short curly black hair, and a bluff, but not unpleasant countenance."

In 1820 William Wordsworth's Scottish friend Sir Walter Scott wrote that the characters in *Ivanhoe* had a fair and comely countenance, a countenance as pale as death, a countenance that appeared elated, a deep flush of shame that suffused a handsome countenance, and a countenance on which premature age had stamped its ghastly features. "It appeared, indeed," wrote Scott, "from the countenance of this proprietor, that he was of a frank but hasty and choleric temper."

Across the Atlantic, James Fenimore Cooper used *countenance* in *The Last of the Mohicans* to describe the contents of his characters' faces. Cooper found an austere countenance, a dejected countenance, an angry countenance, and a haggard and careworn countenance. He eerily described "that sort of dull unmeaning expression which might be supposed to belong to the countenance of a specter" and noted how "the countenance of Uncas changed from its grave composure to a gleam of intelligence and joy." In the countenances of his characters, Cooper found vacancy, dignity, gravity, and guile.

Emily Brontë's immortal *Wuthering Heights* contains an anguished countenance, a grim countenance, and a perplexed countenance. There is an imploring countenance. Heathcliff's "black countenance looked blighting through." In the countenances of these characters, we find meditation, shame, pride, trouble, and blankness. We see a countenance grow deadly pale and a countenance from which horror gradually passes. Catherine's countenance had "a wild vindictiveness in its white cheek."

Emily Brontë's sister Charlotte used *countenance* in her 1847 classic *Jane Eyre* to describe "an expression of almost insupportable haughtiness in her bearing and countenance." "I don't know," she wrote, "what sphynx-like expression is forming in your countenance."

In all of his novels, Nathaniel Hawthorne used *countenance* to describe his profoundly drawn characters. He created characters whose countenances were blank, dull, dark, grim, benign, rigid, scornful, glowing, cheery, wan, unreal, pleasant, undismayed, and benevolent. In the 1851 *House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne wrote that the "aspect of the venerable mansion has always affected me like a human countenance."

Other American writers used *countenance* to describe the physiognomy's visible humanity. Harriet Beecher Stowe noted countenances that were overcast, sad, scowling, and good-natured. Hawthorne's friend Melville created countenances that were composed, glad, benevolent, and curious. Thoreau recalled "Achilles' reproof to Patroclus for his sad countenance." Henry James described how "his pale unlighted countenance had a sort of thin transfiguration." Mark Twain wrote that the "boding uneasiness took possession of every countenance." Stephen Crane noted a morose countenance and described how the "officers were

impatient and snappy, their countenances clouded with the tales of misfortune.”

Kipling, Conrad, and Stevenson loved *countenance*, and Thomas Hardy used it so often that one could fill pages of examples from his novel alone. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy described a ruddy and fair countenance, a smiling countenance, the statuesque repose in a young girl’s countenance, an old woman of mottled countenance, and a martyr’s countenance. Like Hawthorne, Hardy applied the word to architecture: “These bridges,” he wrote, “had speaking countenances.” In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy described “the imperturbable countenance of the heath,” and he observed that in Clym Yeobright’s face “could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future.” Hardy found a countenance overlaid with legible meanings, a countenance slightly flagging, and a countenance that became crimson.

In the twentieth century, authors continued to use *countenance* to explore the animate dimensions of the face. We find it in Barrie’s *Peter Pan* to describe a handsome countenance, a tallow countenance, and a melancholy countenance. Kenneth Grahame used it in *The Wind in the Willows* to describe “the stern unbending look on the countenances of his silent friends.” Edith Wharton used it in *Ethan Frome* to describe Ethan’s wife’s gaunt countenance. Fitzgerald used it in *The Great Gatsby* to describe how “the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room.” Nobel Prize-winner Pearl Buck used it in *The Good Earth* to describe how “he had learned now from that impassive square countenance to detect small changes at first invisible to him.” George Orwell used it in *Animal Farm* to describe how “Napoleon appeared to change countenance.” Ralph Ellison used it in its verbal form in *Invisible Man*: “We will not countenance any aggressive violence.” Harper Lee and Toni Morrison used *countenance*, and Eudora Welty

described “persons I have seen or noticed or remembered in the flesh—a cast of countenance here, a manner of walking there.”

Among modern authors, Joseph Heller, in his brilliant and irreverent *Catch-22*, manifested a fondness for *countenance*. Heller described a storming countenance, a “fierce, regal, just and forbidding countenance,” and a spherical countenance. Heller observed the “continuing rainfall, soaking mordantly into each man’s ailing countenance like the corrosive blot of some crawling disease.”

Though this may seem to have been an elaborate presentation of examples of *countenance*, these have given only a minute indication of the presence of this word in English and American literature. Consider briefly what a complete listing might contain, even if it only included the most famous authors who have written in English.

And what does this inspection of one word reveal that we might not have gained far more easily from a careful glance at a good dictionary? We find, in a way that overwhelms doubt, that *countenance* is an indispensable word, so replete and pervasive in literature that not to know it would be a salient defect in one’s command of English. We find that in its manifold usage, it reveals the extraordinary sensitivity of writers who are observing the extraordinary sensitivity of the human face. We find that *countenance* has been an ideal word for extending the human imagination and the human introspection. We find that the uses of *countenance* demonstrate the synthetic genius of the mind and the divergent possibilities of creativity. And perhaps most importantly, we suspect that this word reveals to us our most important subject: ourselves.