

Classics in the Classroom

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Preface

I first wrote *Classics in the Classroom* in October of 1990, worried that students in the United States were not reading enough serious literature, either fiction or nonfiction. It seemed to me that our educational culture did not understand how critical literature was to students' intellectual development. Few school systems had extensive programs of important, challenging literature; instead, most schools used weak literature anthologies with scraps of famous books in dumbed-down vocabulary. Schools that did include real literature often assigned a single thin classic per semester, relying on low-vocabulary titles such as *The Old Man and the Sea*. In some classrooms, students were shown video versions of classic novels but were not assigned to read them. In some classrooms, students read what are called modernized Shakespeare plays, rather than reading Shakespeare's gorgeous English. In some classrooms, students looked at so-called graphic novels—comic book versions of the classics.

What is missing in all of these surrenders is reading.

Today it is worse. Not long ago I provided a vocabulary workshop for a school system, and the teachers in the workshop told me that in their school system, they were not allowed to assign literature anymore. They were told that literature was not appropriate, that it contained words that the students did not know, that it subjected the students to alternative ideas, and that it was not required in preparing students for ordinary life.

Today, school systems across the country devote massive efforts to remediating the damage that results from the abandonment of reading. Students labor through grueling

arrays of worksheets and skill drills in a numbing attempt to plug the holes caused by the absence of real reading.

It is a fool's errand.

Reading is the essence of education. No formula of drills or worksheets can replace the experience of reading.

Think about what a real reader experiences. A child who begins reading real literature early grows up seeing vocabulary—rich, classic vocabulary—in book after reinforcing book. There is a body of literary vocabulary that great novels of American and British literature share—words such as *countenance*, *visage*, *manifest*, *odious*, *singular*, *serene*, and so forth, and these words are replete in literature. Students who read inherit hundreds of such omnipresent words. They grow up knowing them. They soon see them as old friends. They know perfectly well, without being told, that these words are common and important in literature. They absorb literary vocabulary naturally, through exciting plots and unforgettable characters and moving scenes and deep meanings. They know that words are a painting of life.

A teacher asked me why we should assign books with such words when students will not hear them in their conversations. It is not our job to prepare students for conversations. Our mission is to prepare them for an educated life, for happiness in their colleges and careers, for comprehension in the presence of knowledge in all its forms.

Students who read grow up seeing spelling. They experience each word not only as a sound but as an image, a tiny sculpture of letters, and they absorb effortlessly, without drill, the differences among homophones.

Students who read acquire vast experience with long, complex sentences and the thinking that such sentences impart.

Students who read engage in continual strength training of the imagination. Sentence after sentence demands that they themselves imagine a scene, and this develops their comprehension; it is the opposite of seeing a video, in which their brains slumber in the face of actors.

Students who read are faced with meaning, with characters who summon inner strength and courage, and they incorporate the greatness of human spirit that they encounter in literature.

There is simply no substitute for continual reading of great literature. It is the very essence of education, and it is what develops the mind beyond the close concrete block walls of the classroom.

Appreciations

The ideas in this book have made me remember, with particular clarity and appreciation, the education I was fortunate enough to receive. When I was a student at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale, and at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, I did not know that my education of classics and original source material was particularly unusual. I know it now. To these institutions, and to their standards of excellence and difficulty, I owe my escape from the poverty of concept and of reading experience that a textbook education inflicts on its victims. I also must thank numerous friends and colleagues who have contributed suggestions for books of all kinds to include on my list. I have benefited from the expertise of elementary school librarians, foreign language teachers, history teachers, and English teachers, many of whom have shared their own reading lists with me. Finally, I appreciate Dianne Goldsmith and Bob Yutzy, colleagues and friends, who each read this manuscript and contributed many valuable suggestions for improvement. The book owes much to their insight.

Part I

Chapter One

A Message in a Bottle

When I was a boy in Florida, I put notes in bottles and threw the bottles out into the canal that flowed behind our house. It took me several weeks to collect enough bottles—a few dozen—and to pencil the notes in my little boy’s careful printing, asking questions about the person who found the bottle. *Who are you? How old are you? Where do you live? How did you find this bottle with my note in it?* Eventually, the bottles were ready, and I threw them as far as I could out into the swift current in the middle of the canal, hoping that they would drift from there to the intracoastal waterway and then into the blue Atlantic. For several days, bottles washed up on the beaches near my house, and I would throw them out again, and at last no more bottles floated back. Gradually, I forgot about the bottles and went on growing up. Only sometimes I would suddenly wonder where they had all drifted. I imagined them bobbing in the sparkling waves, under high, tropical clouds, moving slowly toward their far destinations—toward someone. It must have been three years later that I got a letter—in Portuguese—from the Azores. Included was my original, handwritten bottle note, with all of my questions carefully answered. We found someone to translate the answers and the letter, from Manuel, who had found my bottle as he walked on the island beach one sunny morning far across the Atlantic. Now, years later, I have lost Manuel’s letter, but I still have the envelope it came in, and I can’t bring myself to throw it away.

I am looking at Manuel’s envelope now, the paper faded to beige, the brown and blue Portuguese stamps, the date 1960, the return address in beautiful blue script: Vila de

Baixo, Lajes Flores, Azores. Somewhere behind this letter to me, there was a person—a writer. I wonder who he was.

Is a book so different from a message in a bottle? Or from a personal letter? Or from a good talk, in which you look someone in the eye? A book may look like an object, but it doesn't feel to the spirit like an object. A book feels more like a voice, vibrant and seeking. Behind the pages, we sense the eyes of the author. There is an individual behind each book, a human being. Some person is writing to me, and, in Whitman's phrase, I am itching to get at the meaning. "This," said Emily Dickinson, "is my letter to the world / That never wrote to me." When I read letters like Emily's poems, I often wish that, like Saul Bellow's Herzog, I could write back.

Irresistible Books

Every reader knows that the authors who have written the world's classics have written irresistible books for us to read and that, like bottles cast into the sea, these books all contain messages: vivid characters, exciting plots, deep insights, factual history, rich poetry, imaginative fantasy, surprising twists, unique personalities, profound meaning, and noble spirit. There are irresistible books you are ready for when you are little, such as *Winnie the Pooh*, and there are irresistible books you become ready for later, such as *Moby Dick*.

There are irresistible books that are easy to read, such as *The Hobbit*, but there are also irresistible books that require strength and clarity to read, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. There are books that change you, support you, inform you, and inspire you. Each irresistible book is a message, cast on the sea of thought by another person, an author, who may be alive right now somewhere far away, or who may have lived hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

Recently, on reading Castiglione's *The Courtier*, completed in 1518, I was struck by Castiglione's references to authors whose works were classics to him: Homer, Xenophon, Virgil, Caesar, Cicero, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Dante. Like Thoreau 350 years after him, Castiglione discussed Homer and Achilles. This year, my sophomores and I read *The Iliad* and were transfixed by the vivid descriptions of war, by the epic similes, by Achilles and his wrath and his final transformation in the arms of his enemy's father.

Then we read Dante's *Inferno* and were amazed by the rain of fire, and the prisons of slime, and the burning coffins, and the frozen lake, just as Castiglione had been amazed, five centuries before. There is stability in the classics. Their power to mean is unabated, even after centuries. Upon them, a valid education may be constructed. In an age when knowledge is said to become obsolete before it can be learned, this tenacity of the classics attains a new importance for the life of the mind. The facts of physics and the borders of European nations may change, but the *Dialogues* of Plato do not, nor does Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, Dante's *Inferno*, or the poems of Emily Dickinson. Classics offer a stable, international point of reference: students not only in New York, Rome, London, and Paris but also in Madrid, Lagos, Peking, Berlin, and Buenos Aires read Dante, Shakespeare, and Victor Hugo—and they will continue to.

What Is a Classic?

Oh, everyone knows what classics are. Classics are the few books that don't vanish. Perhaps the most salient property of books is that, like the morning mist, they vanish as soon as they see the light. Somewhere, there is the vanished books' burial ground, a crowded place, heaped with bleached

bookbones: vanished novels, vanished biographies, extinct books, paleopoetries.

How many vanished novels were published the year that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* came out? How many no-longer-published minor poets can you name? How many biographies have seen only one printing? A readership, red of tooth and claw, will let only the fittest survive; the rest are naturally selected for extinction. Most books vanish.

Not classics. Classics are the books of all categories that for some reason don't. Sometimes they don't vanish because the reading public keeps buying them. Sometimes they don't vanish because high school or college professors keep ordering them. The interesting question, of course, is why. The specific answers get extremely detailed, but the general answer is very general: classics have meaning and quality. These things appeal to us.

Heritage

And of course, like masterpieces of art and architecture, literary and intellectual classics are a part of our heritage—our legacy, as members of our civilization and, through translation, as members of our species. To be ignorant of this heritage—of humanity's most wonderful stories, metaphors, and ideas—is more than a pity; it is a deprivation of joy and enlightenment, a loss of brightness in life. Our culture seems to reinvent itself anew each moment, and it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that cultural heritage is real. Our creation was no parthenogenesis; we did not spring complete from the head of the father. And we are not Adam. The ideas in our minds and the feelings in our hearts are powerfully influenced by vanished civilizations from which we descend (lost worlds survive within us—witness the grizzled etymologies of our words) and by creative individuals in these civilizations who invented ways

of looking at the world that have now become our “common sense.” Remember Alfred North Whitehead’s epigram that the entire history of Western thought consists of a series of footnotes to Plato? If we wish to retrace and understand our heritage, the clearest path leads back through the classics.

Civilization and Culture

In discussing classics as part of the heritage our civilization offers, I am reminded of Kenneth Clark’s superb film series *Civilisation* (the spelling is British), itself a classic. Clark created his survey of Western art in the belief that civilization—though wonderful and essential—is fragile. He noted that Western civilization had nearly been wiped out when the barbarian hordes overran the Roman Empire and that it had survived because of monks and scholars who protected, copied, and preserved ancient manuscripts on remote Atlantic islands like Iona and Skellig Michael.

Our popular culture is today asserting its own forms of neobarbarian brutality: even recorded music contains unprecedented misogyny and racism, egotism and sadism, dominance and violence. Works such as Stanley Kubrick’s film *Clockwork Orange*, which once seemed hysterical and exaggerated, begin to seem prophetic. The sociopath becomes the role model. The Philistine mocks the scholar. Self-apotheosis and hectoring braggadocio have taken the stage. Swift’s Yahoos, it seems, may inherit the earth. Kenneth Clark felt that nuclear technology had rendered such uncivilized values obsolete, that we have an imperative to be civilized, that the world has become too dangerous a place for us to be uncivilized.

Each civilized individual must acquire civilized characteristics through a series of individual civilizing experiences—reading a book, having an intelligent discussion, listening to an enlightened person, observing

gentle behavior. I think of these experiences as Odysseus moments, for it is, after all, Odysseus who provides Western civilization with its literary prototype of civilized decision, declining immortal life on a sunlit island with a beautiful goddess in order to go home, age, and die with his wife Penelope.

Can you imagine that a young adult who had been educated in the classics—who had read Homer’s *Odyssey*, and Loren Eiseley’s *The Star Thrower*, and Calderón de la Barca’s *Life Is a Dream*, and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, and Jane Goodall’s *In the Shadow of Man*, and William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and the poems of Emily Dickinson, and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and a hundred other such books—can you imagine this young adult delighting in the violence, misogyny, bigotry, and simple-mindedness that pervade certain aspects of society? I cannot, even though I know that some of the worst deeds in history were committed by individuals who ostensibly knew the classics. The classics alone cannot make one civilized, but they are a part of being civilized and a formidable civilizing force if they are taught in the spirit of tolerance, openness, and humanity that is most consistent with their essence. Failing that, they can be subverted, as can any other beautiful and excellent experience.

I think that classics can help us to equip our children with preferences for subtlety, complexity, curiosity, equality, honesty, harmony, and humanity. I think that classics can help to inoculate children against stupidity and cruelty and inspire them with the love of thought. William Butler Yeats gave us a chilling description of the collapse of civilization: things, said Yeats, fall apart; the center cannot hold; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. For the third millennium, Yeats must be proved

wrong: the best must not lack all conviction but must be possessed of an enlightened intensity. A knowledge of the classics can help to mold that intensity, to give it alert, civilized qualities—liveliness, intelligence, and courage.

Complex and Profound

Most classics are complex and profound, far beyond our ability to analyze them completely or to know them absolutely. We cannot get to the bottom of a great book; it is a constellation of human qualities: deliberate, intuitive, passionate, and philosophical. Even the author of a book cannot explain why every word, scene, or character is as it is. Though literary art is more conscious and controlled than the unsophisticated reader realizes, it is still a manifestation of intuitive genius and inspiration—hence the Muse, who breathes inspiration into the writer.

Sometimes the depth of a book will be beautifully visible, as it is in *The Iliad*, where the dialogues between the characters seem artificial and unrealistic when compared to levels of consciousness that we actually utter in conversation but hauntingly realistic when compared to the levels of consciousness that we feel but do not say. The gods and heroes of *The Iliad* don't say what we say; they say the deeper, truer, and more personal things that we think and feel but keep to ourselves.

Not only are the books themselves profound, they also inspire profound responses in us as readers. In reading a book such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, or *The Iliad*, we consciously respond to much of what is in the book, but we also subtly and subconsciously respond. Our love of a book is a combination of these known and unknown responses: we care in ways we can say, and we care in ways we can't say.