

Classics in the Classroom

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Engaging Literature for Gifted Students: Hooked on Classics

Michael Clay Thompson

Meaning

Classics endure, among other reasons, because they mean something to readers. In the age of global terrorism, it is more important than ever for students to read immortal books that elevate the highest spirits of humanity. We think of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *A Tale of Two Cities*, of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, of *The Red Badge of Courage*, of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, of *Profiles in Courage*, *Walden*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Educated Content Educates Minds

The classics have a multitasking essence that other seemingly strong books lack. Even as they develop students' interpretive skills, vocabularies, writing sensitivities, and human feelings, they also inform students directly about the famous writers and characters and titles that populate the educated world's consciousness. Life is full of allusions to Long John Silver, to Hamlet, to Dante, to Tom Sawyer, and only students who have read the classics will catch the references and feel included in the flow. The classics are a repository of ideas, revealing the mind of the world.

Classics Are Politically Correct and Are Not Elitist

Do not believe the uninformed stereotype that classics were written by DWEM's (dead white European males). The great books of the world come from all cultures, ages, and continents. If you wanted direct evidence that every population contained genius, you would cite the classics. It is possible to select from the great books only the works of DWEM's, but that is not the fault of the great writers. Few classics were written by or for aristocrats.

Quantity and Quality: It Takes Both

Literature programs of several novels per year are not strong enough to develop gifted readers, just as programs that feature numerous easy titles are not strong enough. Literature programs for gifted readers should not only contain rigorous titles that test the abilities of the best readers, but should also feature a continuous, yearlong program of strong reading. This might combine a strong program of in-class titles that every student reads with a strong outside reading program that students do at home. In my world literature classes, we all read *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, *The Theban Plays*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Othello*, *Cry the Beloved Country*, and students also read two classic per quarter at home, receiving full credit after having a conversation with me about each book they read. I found that most students postponed reading their outside reading until the last week or two of the term, an indication that they could have read even more. Between the in-class reading and the outside reading, students got about fifteen strong classics per year.

Classic Words: The Great Books, Great Vocabulary

Among the benefits of the classics is that many have strong vocabularies that will develop students' word power. Unfortunately, many school systems concentrate their literature selections on titles that have below grade level vocabularies, such as the Hemingway and Steinbeck novels, which are selected precisely because they have innocent words that all children can already read, without having to learn new words.

Grammar: A Way of Thinking About Literature

The bad stereotype of traditional grammar is that it is unteachable, unlearnable, tedious, and remedial, unfit for gifted minds. The truth is, grammar is very teachable and is an exciting form of higher order thinking, perfect for gifted children who wish, among other things, to look deeply into the extraordinary sentences of great writers. *Vide* the death of Cornwall in *King Lear*. If we are to use/apply grammar throughout the year, we cannot use a protracted grammar program that doesn't get to clauses until late spring. We must employ a compacted review of all four levels of grammar (parts of speech, parts of sentence, phrases, clauses) at the very beginning of the year.

Socratic Discussions: Speaking with Thought

Among the finest training exercises for public speaking is the Socratic seminar or classroom discussion of the classic, in which the teacher selects an interpretive question to which he or she has legitimate doubt (a la Jr. Great Books), and then guides the discussion, letting each student contribute to the development of ideas. The fair hearing of the Socratic discussion makes students feel comfortable and respected, and they will join in more freely and reflectively.

Quote Tests: Amplify the Writer's Words

Often, we approach great literature in the classroom by converting it into other language. Subtly, students' minds are turned away from the direct, electric encounter with the classic to an array of classroom activities that, even when well done, are not the book. The benefit of quotes in quizzes and sometimes even for tests is that quotes let us check student progress while calling even more dramatic attention to the writer's powerful words. Ex: a fifty-quote test on Dante's *Inferno*.

Dramatizations: The Tempest

There are priceless opportunities for dramatization that will enrich students' experience. When reading the passage about the storm in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, have one student flash the lights off and on (lightening), several students go boomboombomm (thunder), and several other students say BANG!, and have one student stand at the front leading the class in leaning left and right (the rocking boat) as designated students shout their lines above the storm.

MLA Papers: The Joy of Formal Writing

The vogue of unevaluated informal writing has distracted emphasis from the joy of competent formal writing. Students should do not one, but repeated formal essays about their literature, using MLA (Modern Language Association) format.

Classics and the Universality of Genius

From *Classics in the Classroom*

Michael C. Thompson

The great books of the world provide us with one of our best demonstrations of the universality of genius among human populations. Consider the diversity in this selection of authors:

Shakespeare, Dante, Melville, Plato, Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte, Malcolm X, Sylvia Plath, Booker T. Washington, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Mitchell, Homer, Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry, Pearl Buck, Geronimo, Garcia Marquez, Anne Frank, James Baldwin, Louisa May Alcott, Mohandas Gandhi, Isak Denisen, Annie Dillard, Confucius, Jomo Kenyatta, Garcia Lorca, Kate Chopin, Victor Hugo, Carlos Fuentes, Phillis Wheatley, Rachel Carson, Goethe, Jorge Luis Borges, Ayn Rand, Chinua Achebe, Ruth Benedict, Claude Brown, Margaret Mead, Emily Bronte, Edith Wharton, WEB DuBois, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, Barbara Tuchman, Tu Fu, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison, Miguel Angel Asturias, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Cervantes, Beatrix Potter, Baroness Emmuska Orczy, Marianne Moore, Dostoevski, Lady Murasaki, Marco Polo, Chairman Mao, Lao Tzu, Guy de Maupassant, Harper Lee, Mikhail Lermontov, George Eliot, Euclid, Alexander Dumas, Alexander Pushkin, Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Castiglione, Chekhov, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Machiavelli, Ibsen, Flaubert, Euripides, Sappho, Wilma Dykeman, Robert Burns, Calderon de la Barca, Benvenuto Cellini, Constantine Cavafy, Elizabeth Browning, Elizabeth Bishop, Rabindranath Tagore, Jane Austen.

The Unpopular *Iliad*?

from *Classics in the Classroom*, 2nd edition

Michael C. Thompson

In thinking about the unpopularity of classics, it helps to consider the accomplishment of *The Iliad*, gasp. What would it take to duplicate the literary feat of *The Iliad*? How popular would a book have to be to do what *The Iliad* has done, to survive as oral epic poetry for centuries before being written down? And to be still revered as one of the world's supreme works three thousand years later, at a time when the ancient language it was finally written in was no longer used as a living language by anyone? And to be translated into hundreds of other modern languages, none of which even existed at the time the book was created?

Let's go as far forward in time as Homer is backwards. What are your chances of writing a book that will be revered across the galaxy in 4994 A.D., when today's English is a long-vanished ancient tongue, an arcane historical footnote like say, the language of Ur of Chaldea, familiar only to the most dust-ridden scholars on some desert planet orbiting Betelgeuse?

Think of it: *The Iliad* was already ancient literature to Alexander the Great. Taught to him by Aristotle, himself, it was the one book Alexander took with him on his invasion of Persia. Alexander died in 323 B.C.

B.C.

Are there any volunteers to take on *The Iliad*?

Every book should be so unpopular.

replete
fractious
dejected
languor
amiable
sanguine
allude
copse
irrevocable
unction
revile
artifice
retort
plaintive
brazen
imperious
voluble
victual
rancour
tedious
ignominy
sward
gesticulate

affable
despond
dolorous
obtuse
immure
avidity
wistful
sinuous
plausible
accouter
stringent
repartee
assuage
noisome
bellow
listless
cudgel
contrition
habiliment
prostrate
fallow
errant

portentous
subterfuge
countenance
vouchsafe
lurid
paroxysm
asperity
benison
gesticulate
placid
peremptory
querulous
sonorous
athwart
repast
privation
comely
doleful
panoply
turbid
expatiate
sinuous

Classic Words

Michael C. Thompson

What words do students really need to know if they are to read comfortably in the classics of English and American literature? My fifteen-year study of 30,000 examples from over 130 different works indicates that the following words appear with extraordinary frequency. They are the top 100 words in my *Classic Words* database, in descending order of frequency, and they appear even in so-called children's classics, such as *Tom Sawyer*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and *The Call of the Wild*. The order is across, then down.

countenance
serene
singular
abate
undulate
venerate
incredulous
lurid
sagacity
tremulous
abyss
wistful
palpable
perplex
somber
expostulate
vivacious
pervade
procure
magnanimous
sallow
resolute
fain
affect
wan
reproach
conjure
alacrity
verdure
zenith
dilate
abash
conjecture
appellation

profound
sublime
clamor
allude
acute
exquisite
traverse
languid
vulgar
odious
stolid
prostrate
vex
portent
importune
subtle
despond
pensive
abject
oppress
ignominy
articulate
genial
billow
indolent
morose
retort
animated
adjacent
inexorable
fortnight
profane
swarthy

manifest
prodigious
visage
grotesque
vivid
melancholy
repose
superfluous
placid
pallor
condescend
remonstrate
amiable
peremptory
audible
tangible
doleful
apprehension
austere
oblique
eccentric
furtive
mien
confound
maxim
latter
antipathy
vestige
rebuke
livid
din
imperious
impute

The Elitist Curriculum Fallacy

from *Classics in the Classroom*, 2nd edition

Michael C. Thompson

A note on the elitist curriculum fallacy. I know, I hear it too: the classics are an elitist curriculum, inappropriate for many students and groups of students, unsuited for the majority of futures that students in our schools will actually attain. Most students should not or need not be taught classics; instead, they should be taught things more practical and useful for the lives they will lead.

The first point, of course, is that educating all students to a high standard is not elitist—it is teaching great books and great ideas only to honors and gifted college-bound students that is elitist. Let me emphasize a point I mentioned earlier: I have taught all ability levels for nearly twenty years, and I know that all students love beautiful books and beautiful ideas; all students love challenge; all students love to have a pride in their own minds; all students love the feeling that they are learning. Elitist? What’s so democratic about deliberately limiting the education of some students? Making assumptions about the futures that kids with lower reading levels will attain is an insidious form of bias—by depriving them of a genuinely strong education, we create a self-fulfilling tragic prophecy. Classics aren’t practical? What’s so practical about being poorly educated?

Some years ago, I taught two basic classes and two gifted classes in the same semester—this in a school where the tracking system included four tracks: gifted, honors, standard, and basic. The basic kids, as you might guess, were not only basic in reading level; they were also alienated and academically intimidated. Even so, I couldn’t face using basal readers and blue worksheets with them; it just seemed like putting another nail in their coffin. So I did the obvious thing: I talked to the kids. “Listen,” I said, “how would you like to read some good stuff? I mean famous books with original characters and stories? What if we read one or two of these books aloud together as a trial, and I will make sure that no one is embarrassed? If you get to a word you don’t know, you can either try to pronounce it, or think for a minute before trying it, or ask me how to pronounce it, and I will tell you. What do you think?” They thought they’d try it, so long as if it didn’t work, we’d quit.

Well, that year we read 2,000 pages of classics aloud. My basic class read *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Time Machine*, *I Am the Cheese*, *The Hobbit*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, and I don't remember what all. We had a wonderful time, I and the kids who had once said, "Man, Mr. Thompson, I never read a WHOLE BOOK before!" One day that spring, my Exceptional Children's Director came to visit and to see if I needed anything for my gifted classes. As she came in, the basic kids were discussing Scout Finch and Boo Radley and the importance of standing in someone else's shoes. The discussion turned synthetic—to whether Scout Finch was smarter than Henry Fleming or Bilbo Baggins. The kids got into a vehement comparative argument, pointing out facts and incidents from the stories to support their claims. Finally, the period ended, and the kids filed out arguing, leaving my Exceptional Children's Director sitting in one of the student desks, looking at me with a puzzled countenance. "Mike," she asked, "was that one of your gifted classes?" It was another example of the Pygmalion Effect, in which the class becomes what you envision it to be, like the sculpture of Galatea that comes to life in the myth of Pygmalion. In this case, I really believed that the "basic" kids too would have more fun reading good books than bad books.

When I hear people argue that teaching classics is elitist, I wonder what they think. Do they think that the classics have all been written by aristocrats? Do they think that minority authors have not been the authors of some of the world's greatest classics? Do they think that the classics assert the values of the propertied classes? Do they think that only aristocrats have the intelligence to understand and appreciate classics? Do they think that the universal themes of the classics are less relevant than "high interest" stories of motorcycles, drugs, or teenage sexuality, and that it is therefore an insult to suggest that *Macbeth* is a better book than a high interest title?

It is not elitist to teach classics; it is elitist to teach them only to college-bound students. Children of all abilities need lively minds and exposure to good books, and it is elitist to define things otherwise. What teacher would wish his or her own child, regardless of ability, to never have the experience of reading a classic, or to slump year after year over tedious workbooks? Thomas Jefferson once noted that those who want a nation that is both uneducated and governed by a representative democracy want "what never was and never will be." There is no reason why the average citizen should not have a fulfilling intellectual experience and be fully capable of participating in our splendid democracy.

KOHLBERG'S

Stages of Moral Reasoning

Preconventional

1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

Action is bad if punished, right if not. *Choose right to avoid punishment.*

2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation

Pragmatic reciprocity: obedience for gain *Choose right to get reward.*

Conventional

3: Interpersonal Concordance, Good Boy-Nice Girl

Good is what gains approval of others. *Choose right to gain approval.*

4: Law and Order Orientation

Concern for authority, rules, and social order. Duty. *Choose right to obey authority.*

Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled

5: Social Contract Legalistic Orientation

Laws made by human agreement, can be changed if not good. Emphasis on procedural rules for resolution of differences. Right is what has been agreed upon by society. *Choose right to cooperate with humanity.*

6: Universal Ethical Principal Orientation

Self-chosen abstract ethics emphasizing comprehensiveness, universality, consistency. Right is what is universally ethical. *Choose right to avoid self-condemnation.*

Instructions: one student flashes lights, one student leads a group going boomboom as thunder, one student leads the whole class leaning left and right as the boat rocks, and several students call out their lines above the tempest!

The Tempest, I.i.

Scene I. On a ship at sea. A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightening heard.

Enter a shipmaster and a Boatswain.

Master. Boatswain!

Boatswain. Here master. What cheer?

Master. Good, speak to the mariners! Fall to't yarely, or we run ourselves aground. Bestir! Bestir!

Enter mariners.

Boatswain. Heigh, my hearts! Cheerly, cheerly, my hearts! Yare, yare! Take in the topsail. Tend to the master's whistle. Blow till thou burst thy wind, if room enough!

Enter Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Ferdinand, Gonzalo, and Lords.

Alonso. Good boatswain, have care. Where's the master? Play the men.

Boatswain. I pray now, keep below.

Antonio. Where is the master, boatswain?

Boatswain. Do you not hear him? You mar our labor. Keep your cabins. You do assist the storm.

Gonzalo. Nay, good, be patient.

Boatswain. When the sea is. Hence! What cares these roarers for the name of king? To cabin. Silence!

Trouble us not!

Gonzalo. Good, yet remember whom thou hast aboard.

Boatswain. None that I love more than myself. You are a councilor. If you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. Use your authority. If you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of an hour, if it so hap. Cheerly, good hearts! Out of our way, I say.

Gonzalo. I have great comfort from this fellow. Methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him, his complexion is perfect gallows. Stand fast, good Fate to his hanging. Make the rope of his destiny our cable, for our own doth little advantage. If he be not born to be hanged, our case is miserable.

Boatswain. Down with the topmast! Yare! Lower, lower! Bring her to try with main course. [A cry within] A plague upon this howling! They are louder than the weather or our office.

Yet again! What do you here? Shall we give o'er, and drown? Have you a mind to sink?

Sebastian. A pox o' your throat, you bawling blasphemous, incharitable dog!

Boatswain. Work you, then!

Antonio. Hang, cur! Hang, you insolent noisemaker. We are less afraid to be drowned than thou art.

Gonzalo. I'll warrant him for drowning, though the ship were no stronger than a nutshell.

Boatswain. Lay her ahold, ahold! Set her two courses. Off to sea again, lay her off!

Mariners. All lost! To prayers, to prayers! All lost!